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## ABSTRACT

First Things First is a comprehensive intervention to transform low-performing public schools with high percentages of non-White and at-risk students. It encompasses major changes in school structure, instruction, and accountability and governance. The program model, which is grounded both in research and the best practices of schools serving high-risk youth, was developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and was initially mounted in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system in 1998. New schools were phased in in Missouri, Mississippi, and Texas. This report highlights an early stage in the scaling-up effort: selection of new sites and planning within them for the initiative's implementation. Data from surveys, interviews, and observations involving teachers, students, and administrators indicated that setting up a whole-school reform initiative in multiple locations stretched the capacities of program developers and staff; whether developers should be prescriptive about important matters or give teachers the freedom to make their own choices was a difficult decision, but trying to do both at once was more difficult; and commitment to the initiative was stronger among less experienced teachers, teachers who considered their principals responsive to their concerns, and teachers who believed they played an important decision-making role. Non-White teachers were generally more positive about the initiative than Whites. Two appendices contain the correlation matrix of early outcome measures at the expansion schools and a comparison of staff responses in expansion schools and in Kansas City, Kansas. (Contains 19 references.) (SM)

# Scaling Up First Things First

## Site Selection and the Planning Year



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# **Site Selection and the Planning Year**

Janet C. Quint

**MDRC**

Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation

April 2002

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## Overview

First Things First seeks to increase student and teacher engagement and boost academic achievement in low-performing schools by transforming the school environment through comprehensive changes in school structure, instruction, and governance. The program model, which is grounded in both research and the best practices of schools serving high-risk youth, was developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and was initially mounted in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system. Promising early results led the Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education to support the initiative's expansion into 19 middle and high schools — six additional schools in Kansas City; eight in Houston, Texas; three in suburban St. Louis County; and two in the Mississippi Delta communities of Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi. All these schools are characterized by large percentages of nonwhite students and students at high risk of academic failure. The new schools are being phased in over two years, in two groups.

MDRC is evaluating the implementation and effects of the intervention at the Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas sites. This report covers the first 22 months of the Scaling Up First Things First project (November 1999-August 2001), a period that included the selection of these sites and the planning year for the first group of schools. The report draws on a combination of quantitative data from staff surveys and qualitative findings from interviews and observations. Its principal findings are these:

- Setting up a whole-school reform initiative in multiple locations required a great deal of the program developers. Site selection, the provision of technical assistance, the preparation of background materials, and general troubleshooting stretched the capacities of IRRE staff and consultants.
- Whether developers should be prescriptive about important matters or give teachers the freedom to make their own choices is a difficult decision. But the worst option may be to try to do both at once. As part of the planning process, IRRE allowed teachers in the first group of schools phasing in First Things First to make their own decisions about school structure. Yet this was a subject about which IRRE held strong convictions, and it voiced these so powerfully that the teachers became resentful, feeling that their only real “choice” was to adopt IRRE’s recommendations. Recognizing that it had made a major mistake, IRRE changed its strategy: For the second group of phase-in schools, it will specify the schools’ structure in advance; although staff will have choices about other matters, this will not be one of them.
- As expected, survey findings indicate that commitment to First Things First was stronger among teachers who had less experience, teachers who perceived their principal as being responsive to their concerns, and teachers who felt that they had played an important role in decision-making. An unexpected finding was that nonwhite teachers generally felt more positive about the initiative than their white counterparts.

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## Preface

American secondary schools are generally seen as complex institutions that have proved resistant to change. Yet students' performance in middle schools and high schools varies widely. For low-income and minority students, particularly, achievement levels and graduation rates are low. This dilemma prompted MDRC to focus much of its current education research on secondary schools and led the U.S. Department of Education to initiate a project supporting the development and evaluation of comprehensive reforms at the secondary school level aimed at increasing students' engagement in school, academic achievement, and graduation rates. The reform approach of First Things First, developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), was selected to be part of this Department of Education-led effort. MDRC is evaluating the implementation and effects of First Things First as the initiative expands into schools beyond Kansas City, Kansas, the original site, where it has been put in place throughout the district.

First Things First is an important intervention in itself because of promising early results in Kansas City. But the project is of even broader interest because it intentionally incorporates many best practices common to other school reform efforts: structural changes in large schools to create small learning communities, block scheduling, continuity of teachers working with students over multiple years, an emphasis on core academic skills (reading and math), professional development to improve instruction, and high standards of accountability. Thus, the findings from this project promise to inform many other aspects of secondary school reform.

This report focuses on an early stage in the scaling-up effort for First Things First: the selection of new sites and the planning within them for the initiative's implementation. The approach of First Things First sees these steps as critical to creating the preconditions for real reform, namely, a sense of urgency, knowledge, possibility, and commitment. Unlike some other interventions, First Things First is guided by an explicit theory of change, one that sees inducing these responses among school staff members as the first key change brought about by the reform. This report describes the strategies used by IRRE to select sites and structure the planning process as well as the initial conditions and responses within the participating schools. Later reports in the series will carry the story forward to the actual implementation of First Things First, its effects on students' educational experience, and the longer-term impacts on students' academic success.

Kent McGuire  
Senior Vice President

## Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the cooperation of administrators and teachers at the schools participating in the Scaling Up First Things First demonstration. They were willing to share their experiences and reflections in both interviews and surveys, providing the data on which the report is principally based. For this, we are grateful both to the staff members themselves and to on-site researchers Hines Cronin, Brad Dufrene, Belita Leal, and Marianne Wilson, who displayed the special combination of inquisitiveness and tact essential to collecting high-quality information.

Oliver Moles, our program officer at the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), read an earlier draft of the report. We appreciate his personal support of and interest in the project.

We are grateful to Michelle Gambone and William Moore, who played a key role in helping us to conceptualize the research effort. At the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), Laurie Levin, Angela Spence, and Steve Peffers supplied important insights on site selection and planning for First Things First from the developers' perspective. They, along with Jim Connell and Susan Bloom, provided a careful, thoughtful review of an earlier draft of the document. Adena Klem's suggestions strengthened the staff and student surveys.

Numerous MDRC staff and consultants were important to our work on this report. Fred Doolittle provided guidance, review, and ongoing support regarding all aspects of the research. The regression analysis in Chapter 4 was informed by Howard Bloom's wise counsel and suggestions.

The report draws heavily on staff survey data. Carolyn Eldred was responsible for the development of this survey (and of the student survey as well). Marla Sherman at MDRC managed the numerous activities involved in readying the surveys for administration, assisted by Shirley Campbell, Shirley James, and their capable staffs. Linda Kuhn single-handedly carried out the fielding of the surveys at all the schools and monitored the preparation of the resulting data files. Julian Brash was a careful, thoughtful programmer.

Angela Estacion and Corinne Herlihy offered helpful suggestions for improving the report. Bernice Melamud handled the myriad details associated with the report's production. Vivian Mateo contributed her skills in creating figures and tables, and Vannett Davy provided assistance throughout.

Robert Weber edited the report.

The Author

## Executive Summary

First Things First is a comprehensive intervention to transform low-performing public schools. The program model, which is based on research and on the best practices of schools that have successfully served high-risk students, encompasses major changes in school structure, instruction, and accountability and governance — all aimed at creating engaging environments for students and teachers alike and at improving students' academic achievement. The critical features of First Things First are described in Table ES.1.

Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE), headed by James P. Connell, First Things First was introduced in the Kansas City, Kansas, school system beginning in 1998. Promising early results led the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education to support the initiative's expansion in secondary schools in additional urban and rural settings.

The new schools are being phased in over a two-year period, in two groups. Schools in the first group include a high school and its two feeder middle schools in the Riverview Gardens School District in St. Louis County, Missouri; two high schools in Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, located in the Mississippi Delta; and a high school and middle school in Houston, Texas.<sup>1</sup> These schools underwent a year of planning during the 2000-2001 school year and have now embarked on their first year of program implementation. Three additional high schools and three middle schools in Houston make up the second group of schools, where the 2001-2002 school year is a planning year and implementation will begin in the 2002-2003 school year.

Scaling Up First Things First, a five-year research and demonstration project, represents a collaboration of two organizations: IRRE provides support and technical assistance to the participating schools and districts, while the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) oversees the project and is responsible for conducting evaluation activities in all sites outside Kansas City. This report covers the first 22 months of the expansion effort (November 1999-August 2001), a period that included site selection and the planning year for the first group of sites. The report draws on a combination of quantitative data from staff surveys and qualitative findings from interviews and observations.

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<sup>1</sup>During the 2001-2002 academic year, the two high schools in Greenville, Mississippi, merged to form a single high school with two campuses, now known as Greenville-Weston High School. Until this year, however, they were two separate schools — Greenville High School and T. L. Weston High School — and are treated as such in this report.

## **Scaling Up First Things First**

### **Table ES.1**

#### **The Seven Critical Features of First Things First**

---

##### **Structural Changes**

1. Lower student-adult ratios to 15:1 during language arts and math classes for at least 10 hours per week.
2. Provide continuity of care across the school day, across the school years, and between school and home by forming small learning communities. The same core group of eight to ten professionals stays with the same group of 150-250 students for extended periods during the school day for all three years of middle school and for at least two-year periods in high school. The Family Advocate System is also aimed at ensuring continuity of care between staff of the small learning communities and students' families.

##### **Instructional Changes**

3. Set high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards that define clearly what all students will know and be able to do by the time they leave high school and at points along the way. Performance on standards-based tests is linked directly to students' advancement and grading, drives curriculum and instruction in all courses, and is discussed regularly with students and their families. Adults and students agree on conduct standards, which are reinforced by adults modeling positive behaviors and attitudes and which are sustained by clear benefits to students and adults for meeting them and consequences for violating them.
4. Provide enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, by making learning more active and connected in safe and respectful learning environments; to perform, by linking assessment strategies that use multiple modes of learning and tie performance directly to standards; and to be recognized, by creating individual and collective incentives for student achievement and by providing leadership opportunities in academic and non-academic areas.
5. Equip, empower, and expect all staff to improve instruction by creating a shared vision and expectation of high-quality teaching and learning in all classrooms; supporting small learning communities' implementation of research-based instructional strategies to fulfill that vision; and engaging all staff in ongoing study to improve curricular and instructional approaches.

##### **Accountability and Governance Changes**

6. Allow for flexible allocation of available resources by teams and schools, based on instructional and interpersonal needs of students. Resources include people (students and staff); instructional facilities; time for instructional planning and professional development; and discretionary funds.
  7. Assure collective responsibility by providing collective incentives and consequences for small learning communities, schools, and central office staff that are linked to change in student performance.
- 

SOURCE: IRRE documents.

The principal findings are these:

- Site selection, the provision of technical assistance, the preparation of background materials, and general troubleshooting stretched the capacities of IRRE staff and consultants.
- In retrospect, IRRE felt it had made a mistake by allowing faculties to make decisions about school structure — a matter about which IRRE held strong convictions; it made its own recommendations so forcefully that school staff felt dictated to anyway. This error will not be repeated at the second group of expansion sites, where school structure will not be open for staff discussion.
- Survey findings indicate that commitment to First Things First was stronger among teachers who had less experience, teachers who were nonwhite, teachers who perceived their principal as being responsive to their concerns, and teachers who felt that they had played an important role in decision-making.

## Site Selection

Selecting appropriate sites for the scaling-up effort was a labor-intensive affair for IRRE, an organization with a small core staff. This was not due to a dearth of interest — the hope and promise of improved student scores on high-stakes tests attracted many school districts. But the selection process entailed multiple efforts at contact, lengthy phone conversations to explore mutual interest, full-day site visits to promising locations, and an informational conference for prospective candidates. Site selection criteria involved both objective indicators of need and the developers' subjective judgments of local administrators' will and capacity to undertake major reforms.

The initial agreement with OERI stipulated that the demonstration include a medium-size school district with a number of high schools and middle schools. Predictably, finding such a district proved much more difficult than finding individual schools and smaller districts willing to implement the intervention, and ultimately OERI agreed to substitute six additional schools in Houston for the district site.

IRRE did not require, or even recommend, that school staff members vote on adopting the initiative; its staff argued that support from district and school leadership was sufficient and that staff buy-in would develop over time. Only one school actually conducted a formal vote.

## Site Characteristics

While varying considerably in scale, ethnic mix, per pupil expenditures, and other characteristics, all schools served primarily nonwhite students; between 24 percent and 65 percent of these students, depending on school and grade, were estimated by IRRE to be at high risk of school dropout. At the three high schools in Mississippi and one middle school in Riverview Gardens, Missouri, the majority of staff members were African-American; elsewhere, they were predominantly white. Almost half the teachers across all sites had been in the classroom for more than 20 years — a notable finding, in that previous studies have associated greater teacher tenure with increased resistance to reform. Just over half the teachers had never been involved in any school reform efforts; those who did report involvement tended to view these efforts moderately favorably. A “culture of continuous staff improvement” was not well developed at the schools, and the majority of teachers perceived parents as being uninvolved with their children’s learning.

One of the structural changes contained in the initiative’s program model — block scheduling of classes — was in place in most of the schools. The majority of teachers also felt that high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards — another critical feature of First Things First — were already in place in their schools.

## Planning-Year Experiences

The purposes of the planning year are to build knowledge of and support for First Things First among faculty members and to initiate the structural, instructional, and governance and accountability changes that are at the heart of the initiative. IRRE devoted considerable time and resources to launching First Things First: Its core staff and consultants organized and led schoolwide meetings to introduce all staff members to the intervention, conducted monthly site monitoring visits, provided ongoing technical assistance in a number of areas, and prepared a detailed planning guide. All these activities — in conjunction with the continuing search for a district site and ongoing technical assistance to the Kansas City, Kansas, school district — stretched IRRE’s capacity considerably. Nonetheless, site staff members generally agreed that IRRE involvement was a critical factor in making change happen.

The planning year at the first group of program sites illustrates a tension that developers of education reform models often face between being prescriptive and giving school staff members choices about key elements of the reform. IRRE had strongly held views — based on its earlier experiences in Kansas City — about the specific way in which schools should be restructured. But it was initially reluctant to insist that all schools follow its recommendations and instead allowed teachers to make their own decisions about school structure. It asserted its own views so strongly, however, that school staff felt dictated to anyway, and the experience left



many teachers feeling manipulated and disillusioned. Support for the intervention did not begin to jell until many months later, when staff members began to plan concrete tasks together.

IRRE has learned from its mistake, which will not be repeated. Staff at the second set of Houston schools joining the demonstration will have a say in other matters, but school structure will not be up for discussion.

The districts strongly supported the effort, making planning for First Things First the centerpiece of their staff development activities and providing financial and staff resources to aid the new intervention. One of the most important forms of support was the appointment of a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) at each school who was charged with guiding and overseeing the reform process. The SIF's role was a difficult one, requiring strong leadership skills, organizational ability, and the capacity both to empathize with and to separate from the concerns of faculty members.

## **Early Staff Responses to First Things First**

The theory of change underlying First Things First posits that, for the initiative to be implemented successfully, teachers must be knowledgeable about the reform, must believe that it is both vitally necessary and feasible, must feel committed to it, and must feel ready to implement it. The staff survey measured staff responses on all these "early outcome" measures between five and a half and six months after First Things First was introduced in their schools. Findings across all schools are reported below; it is important to note, however, that staff responses at the various schools differed significantly.

Somewhat over half (56 percent) the respondents at the eight schools reported having some knowledge of all the critical features of the intervention, but few said that they knew a lot about them. Although the vast majority of respondents believed that students in their schools would benefit from all these features' being implemented, only about one-third believed that this would be essential to improving students' achievement. The largest group of respondents (57 percent) had what might be characterized as a cautiously optimistic approach to the possibility of change, reporting that they were somewhat confident that the intervention could be implemented in their schools.

Almost half the respondents said that they were very committed to First Things First, and most of the rest said that they were somewhat committed to it. At all schools, staff members rated their principal as being much more committed to the initiative than they themselves were. At this relatively early stage, however, few respondents said that they were well prepared to implement all of First Things First, and a third said that they were not at all prepared to do so.

It is of interest that the responses of staff at the scaling-up sites generally fell within the same range as their counterparts in the Kansas City, Kansas, schools during those schools' planning years. There was one exception: Kansas City teachers reported more knowledge of the initiative — in part, perhaps, because the district's central office had a full year to plan First Things First before planning began at the school campuses. This meant that the Kansas City SIFs, who were hired during the district's planning year, were much more familiar with the initiative than the newly appointed SIFs at the expansion sites. Furthermore, because First Things First was phased in over time in Kansas City, teachers there who began implementation later were able to learn about the initiative from the experiences of teachers who had started earlier.

The evaluation sought to identify factors associated with different staff responses to the early outcome measures. Multiple regression analysis was used to assess the importance of each factor while holding the other factors constant.

The study confirms that leadership matters: Staff members' beliefs that their principal was responsive to their viewpoint and was concerned for their well-being were significantly and positively related to their answers on all the early outcome measures. Consistent with the literature suggesting that more experienced teachers are more resistant to reform, the more experienced teachers at the expansion sites were more skeptical that First Things First would improve students' performance and were less committed to the initiative than their colleagues who were newer to teaching. Unsurprisingly, staff members who had had previous experience with school reform efforts and who believed that these efforts had had positive effects tended to be more positively disposed toward First Things First as well.

It is noteworthy that nonwhite staff members were more confident than white staffers that First Things First could be implemented and would improve student performance. It seems plausible that nonwhite staff may have bought more fully than their white counterparts into First Things First's central message that "all students can learn."

Finally, those who believed that staff at their schools (as opposed to the district or school leadership) had had a voice in making important decisions about how First Things First would be implemented were more receptive to the initiative than those who did not see the teachers as similarly empowered.



## Chapter 1

# Introduction

This report covers the first 22 months (November 1999-August 2001) of the Scaling Up First Things First research and demonstration project. It describes site selection and planning activities for the project and considers its early outcomes. First Things First is a promising approach to district and whole-school reform that is now being tested in 25 American high schools and middle schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students. Designed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) — headed by James P. Connell, a developmental psychologist — First Things First includes changes in school structure, instructional practices, and accountability and governance that are aimed at making schools more engaging places for students and adults alike and at improving students' academic performance. Implementation of these changes is intended to require only modest and temporary increases in resources. The model is based on research conducted by Connell and others on the factors making for high engagement and high achievement among adolescents, on the literature on organizational change and effective educational practices, and on the experiences of schools (such as Central Park East Secondary School in East Harlem, New York) that have succeeded with students who might otherwise be at high risk of school failure.

Beginning in 1998, First Things First has been introduced in stages in all comprehensive high schools, middle schools, and elementary schools in Kansas City, Kansas, a city of some 150,000 situated across the Missouri River (and the state boundary) from Kansas City, Missouri. The majority of the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools' 22,000 students are either African-American or Hispanic, and free and reduced-cost lunch rates exceed 80 percent in the secondary schools. The first-year results from Wyandotte High School — the first high school to implement First Things First in Kansas City — were very promising: A 10-year pattern of declining enrollment was reversed, and attendance and graduation rates increased. These positive early outcomes led IRRE to seek to expand the initiative's framework to other locations.

Scaling Up First Things First is a five-year effort, supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) in the U.S. Department of Education, to test the initiative in secondary schools in a variety of additional settings. The new schools are being phased in over a two-year period, in two groups. Schools in the first group include a high school and its two feeder middle schools in the Riverview Gardens School District in St. Louis County, Missouri; two high schools in Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, located in the Mississippi

Delta; and a high school and middle school in Houston, Texas.<sup>1</sup> These schools underwent a year of planning during the 2000-2001 academic year and have now embarked on their first year of implementing the initiative. Three additional high schools and three middle schools in Houston make up the second group of schools, where the 2001-2002 academic year is a planning year and implementation will begin in the 2002-2003 academic year. In addition, the last two high schools in Kansas City, Kansas, to implement the initiative — along with their feeder middle schools — are also formally part of the Scaling Up project. Table 1.1 shows the five school districts and the secondary schools that are implementing First Things First.

The research and demonstration project represents a collaboration of two organizations. IRRE provides support and technical assistance to the participating schools and districts both through its own small core staff and through a network of experienced practitioners and change agents who are consultants to the organization. As the program developer, IRRE will also produce reports and guides directed toward school and district administrators to discuss the practical and policy issues involved in implementing First Things First.

The Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) oversees the demonstration project and is responsible for conducting evaluation activities in all sites outside Kansas City, Kansas, where an independent evaluation has been in place for four years.<sup>2</sup> The two evaluations are coordinated, using the same outcome measures and analytic approaches to attain the ultimate goal: assessing the impacts of First Things First on such indicators of student achievement as graduation rates and scores on standardized tests.

First this chapter considers the theory of change underlying First Things First and the way in which the changes in school structure, instruction, and accountability and governance — constituting the seven “critical features” of the initiative’s model — fit into that theory. Then the chapter describes the scope and contents of this report and discusses the data sources on which the report is based.

## **The Initiative’s Theory of Change and the Program Model**

A major strength of the First Things First initiative is that it is undergirded by a theory of change that lays out the causal path by which the intervention is expected to increase student achievement. This theory of change, shown in Figure 1.1, is itself grounded in a substantial research literature and is based in part on a theoretical model of self-system processes developed

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<sup>1</sup>During the 2001-2002 academic year, the two high schools in Greenville, Mississippi, merged to form a single high school with two campuses, now known as Greenville-Weston High School. Until this year, however, they were two separate schools — Greenville High School and T. L. Weston High School — and are treated as such in this report.

<sup>2</sup>See Gambone, Klem, Moore, and Summers, 2002.

## **Scaling Up First Things First**

**Table 1.1**

### **School Districts and Secondary Schools Implementing or Planning to Implement First Things First**

---

#### **Kansas City (KS) Public Schools**

Wyandotte High School  
Central Middle School  
Northwest Middle School  
Washington High School  
Arrowhead Middle School  
Eisenhower Middle School  
Harmon High School\*  
Argentine Middle School\*  
Rosedale Middle School\*  
Schlagle High School\*  
Coronado Middle School\*  
West Middle School\*

#### **Houston (TX) Independent School District**

Lee High School\*  
Sharpstown Middle School\*  
Sam Houston High School\*  
Sharpstown High School\*  
Westbury High School\*  
Fondren Middle School\*  
Fonville Middle School\*  
Welch Middle School\*

#### **Riverview Gardens (MO) Public Schools**

Riverview Gardens High School\*  
Central Middle School\*  
East Middle School\*

#### **Greenville (MS) Public Schools**

Greenville-Weston High School\*

#### **Shaw (MS) Public Schools**

Shaw High School\*

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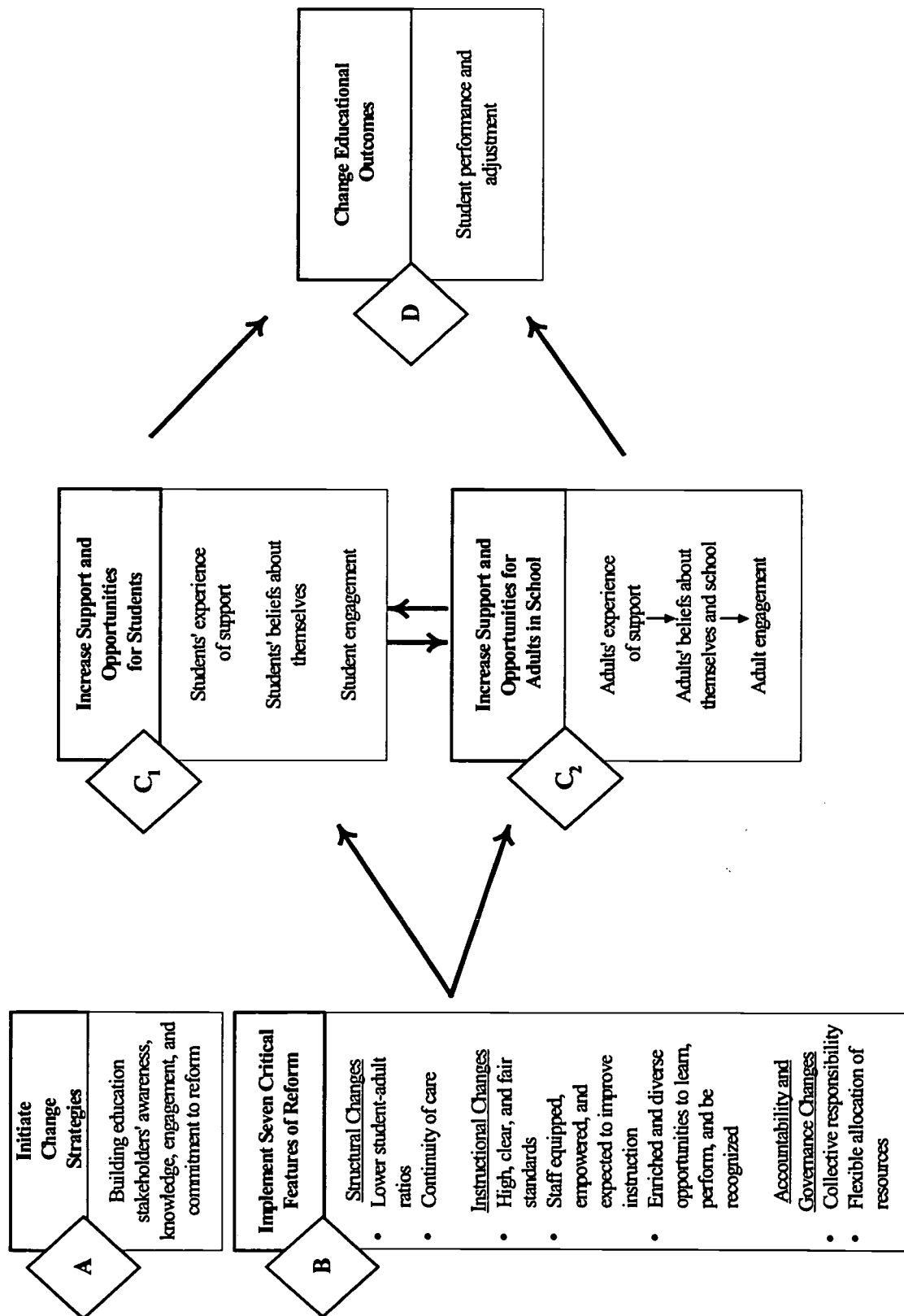
SOURCES: IRRE and MDRC documents.

NOTE: \*Denotes an expansion site under the OERI Scaling Up First Things First contract.

# Scaling Up First Things First

Figure 1.1

## The Initiative's Theory of Change



by Connell and his colleagues.<sup>3</sup> A key premise of the model is that humans have fundamental needs to feel *competent*, to feel *autonomous*, and to feel *related*. That is, they need to feel that they can act in ways that will produce desired effects, that they can make independent choices, and that they are securely attached to important others. Two further premises are that positive development is facilitated by social contexts that meet these fundamental needs and that there are specific elements within these contexts that support or hinder such development.

Box B of Figure 1.1 shows the seven “critical features” of First Things First in abbreviated form; they are elaborated in Table 1.2. The critical features represent key elements within the context of schools that are intended to respond to both students’ and teachers’ fundamental human needs and to transform schools into settings where these needs are fulfilled. It is worth pointing out that these elements are not original or unique to First Things First. They are found, singly or in combination, in many whole-school reform initiatives and thus can be taken as reflecting the best current thinking about the aspects of schools that make them most conducive to learning. What First Things First brings to schools, as discussed below, is not merely a set of features but also a variety of strategies for putting them in place.

The first four of these critical features describe structural and instructional changes that respond to and help satisfy students’ basic needs, as follows:

1. Lower student-adult ratios create opportunities for students to feel known, liked, and cared about by their teachers.
2. Continuity of care is another means of enhancing personal support. It further allows students to develop a clear and stable sense of their teachers’ expectations and standards, against which they can evaluate their own work. Continuity of care between the home and the school is also the goal of the initiative’s new Family Advocate System.
3. High, clear, and fair standards, as noted above, provide clear benchmarks about what teachers consider high-quality work and suitable conduct; they enable students to identify and put into practice strategies for doing well and behaving appropriately.
4. Enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, perform, and be recognized offer students an array of choices and options for developing and exhibiting individual capacities and strengths.

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Connell and Wellborn, 1991; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Connell, 1998.

## **Scaling Up First Things First**

**Table 1.2**

### **The Seven Critical Features of First Things First**

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#### **Structural Changes**

1. Lower student-adult ratios to 15:1 during language arts and math classes for at least 10 hours per week.
2. Provide continuity of care across the school day, across the school years, and between school and home by forming small learning communities. The same core group of eight to ten professionals stays with the same group of 150-250 students for extended periods during the school day for all three years of middle school and for at least two-year periods in high school. The Family Advocate System is also aimed at ensuring continuity of care between staff of the small learning communities and students' families.

#### **Instructional Changes**

3. Set high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards that define clearly what all students will know and be able to do by the time they leave high school and at points along the way. Performance on standards-based tests is linked directly to students' advancement and grading, drives curriculum and instruction in all courses, and is discussed regularly with students and their families. Adults and students agree on conduct standards, which are reinforced by adults modeling positive behaviors and attitudes and which are sustained by clear benefits to students and adults for meeting them and consequences for violating them.
4. Provide enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, by making learning more active and connected in safe and respectful learning environments; to perform, by linking assessment strategies that use multiple modes of learning and tie performance directly to standards; and to be recognized, by creating individual and collective incentives for student achievement and by providing leadership opportunities in academic and non-academic areas.
5. Equip, empower, and expect all staff to improve instruction by creating a shared vision and expectation of high-quality teaching and learning in all classrooms; supporting small learning communities' implementation of research-based instructional strategies to fulfill that vision; and engaging all staff in ongoing study to improve curricular and instructional approaches.

#### **Accountability and Governance Changes**

6. Allow for flexible allocation of available resources by teams and schools, based on instructional and interpersonal needs of students. Resources include people (students and staff); instructional facilities; time for instructional planning and professional development; and discretionary funds.
  7. Assure collective responsibility by providing collective incentives and consequences for small learning communities, schools, and central office staff that are linked to change in student performance.
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SOURCE: IRRE documents.

Box C1 of Figure 1.1 represents the next step in the theory of change. The theory states that implementation of the first four critical features — by increasing the degree of support that students receive from key adults and peers — will induce students to develop positive beliefs about themselves and school. Specifically, students will come to see themselves as more competent in relation to school, more autonomous, and more related to others in the school setting. Furthermore, students who hold positive beliefs about themselves in relation to school will, in turn, display greater engagement with academics. Such “engagement” entails a belief that doing well is personally important and a set of behaviors and feelings that back up that belief and put it into practice (for example, trying hard, preparing for class, paying attention, taking responsibility, and avoiding anger and blame when academic setbacks occur).

Engagement is the most proximal predictor of student performance and within the model, and it is expected to have the strongest association with educational outcomes, which appear in Box D. These outcomes fall under the three general rubrics of *achievement* (standardized test scores, credits), *commitment* (attendance, persistence), and *behavior* (disciplinary actions).

An analogous process exists for teachers (Box C2). Teachers’ experiences of interpersonal and instructional support from their colleagues and others (for example, students, district and school administrators, parents) affect their beliefs about themselves, which in turn influence their own sense of engagement — their willingness to do the utmost to meet their students’ needs.

Three critical features of the program model are directed toward teachers. The first of these straightforwardly addresses instructional change:

5. All staff will be equipped, empowered, and expected to improve instruction. The vehicle for achieving this goal is the formation of teacher learning communities; teachers are expected to work together in small groups to discuss and apply appropriate research-based instructional strategies to meet students’ learning needs and achieve high standards. The process also involves teachers in supporting each other to improve teaching practice.

The last two critical features involve changes in accountability and governance. They focus on realigning school- and district-level policies, expectations, and resources to support implementation of the preceding critical features:

6. Collective responsibility sets clear targets for improvements in instructional practice and student performance and behavior, with rewards for achieving the targets and consequences for falling short.



7. Flexible allocation of resources allows teachers and schools to better respond to the interpersonal and instructional needs of students. These resources include personnel, time (for example, for planning and professional development), and discretionary funds.

The vertical arrows connecting Boxes C1 and C2 in both directions indicate that there are reciprocal influences between increased supports and opportunities for students and for adults. Changes in one promote changes in the other, and vice versa. For example, teachers may modify their instruction in ways that promote student engagement, and such engagement will encourage teachers to strengthen and broaden their commitment to instructional improvement.

From a broader perspective, Box A of Figure 1.1 represents the antecedent stage in the theory of change. According to the theory, implementing whole-school change requires that key stakeholders in the community, the school districts, and the schools themselves perceive a need to change. It also calls for a clear understanding of the change that is sought and an intense and sustained commitment on the part of administrators, teachers, and others to pursuing that change.

First Things First has a repertory of strategies for introducing change. The “early outcomes” of the initiative may be viewed in part as measures of the effectiveness of these change strategies. In this regard, key constructs that are measured include teachers’ awareness of the need to change, their belief that change is possible, their knowledge of the critical features of First Things First, and their personal commitment to the reform process.

## **The Scope and Contents of This Report**

A shorthand way of describing this report is to say that it focuses on Box A of the theory of change diagram (Figure 1.1). Specifically, it discusses the selection and planning-year experiences of the schools involved in the first stage of the scaling-up of First Things First outside Kansas City, Kansas. The ability to report in depth on the Kansas City expansion schools is limited by the fact that the research team there was not funded to conduct, and did not conduct, detailed implementation research at these schools. (Appendix B, however, does compare the early outcomes achieved at the schools outside Kansas City with the outcomes registered by the Kansas City schools at a comparable point in their development.) The report also does not discuss the six Houston schools involved in the second stage of the scaling-up effort. Selected a year later than the two first-stage schools, these six schools, as noted above, have now embarked on the planning year. Their experiences will be charted in later reports.

Throughout, the report aims to give equal weight to the perspectives of the program developer and of administrators and staff members at the participating schools. A major perspective goes largely unrepresented, however: that of the students in these schools. This is because,



during site selection and the planning year, district and school personnel, not the students, were at the center of the action. The restricted focus of this initial report will be greatly expanded in future reports, which will assess the success of First Things First in attaining its ultimate objectives: increasing students' engagement and raising their levels of performance.

The report consists of five chapters. After this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 first discusses the process by which IRRE selected sites to participate in the scaling-up effort; it then describes the schools both statistically and qualitatively, with special attention to those characteristics believed to be important factors shaping implementation. Chapter 3 considers the efforts undertaken during the planning year to begin putting in place the structural, instructional, and accountability and governance changes associated with First Things First and, in so doing, to build knowledge, commitment, and readiness among school staff members. Chapter 4 assesses the extent to which the latter goals were achieved and also examines the personal and school-related characteristics associated with these outcomes; as noted above, Appendix B compares the results at the expansion schools with those achieved by the Kansas City, Kansas, schools at a similar point in the initiative's adoption process. Chapter 5 concludes the report by offering a perspective on the data presented in earlier chapters.

## **Data Sources**

This report draws on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data come from a survey administered in person to staff members at all schools in March and April 2001. Surveys were completed by 589 of the 681 individuals on the staff rosters at these schools, for a completion rate of 86.5 percent across the eight schools.<sup>4</sup> For purposes of comparison with surveys previously conducted in Kansas City, Kansas, the analysis is restricted to the 528 staff members who reported on the survey that they had a role in the classroom, whether as teachers or as aides or paraprofessionals. Consequently, the views of other school personnel (administrators, counselors, librarians, and so on) are not represented in the survey analysis unless these individuals also had a role in the classroom.

The qualitative data largely reflect the efforts of field researchers who have been working at the initiative's sites since September 2000 (in the Mississippi schools) and November 2000 (in Houston and Riverview Gardens). Over the course of the 2000-2001 planning year, among other activities, they conducted formal structured interviews with the eight individuals responsible for leading the reform effort at the different schools, who are known as School Im-

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<sup>4</sup>The proportion of staff members completing the survey varied from 80 percent to 91 percent, depending on the school.

provement Facilitators (SIFs), as well as with 64 “stakeholders” across the eight schools.<sup>5</sup> They also talked informally with teachers and observed whole-school and work group meetings. The author of the report also visited all the sites in April and May 2001 and interviewed 23 district officials, principals, and SIFs across sites. Published data on the school districts and schools rounded out the interview and field notes. In addition, the IRRE project manager and site coordinators were interviewed, and IRRE documents that relate to the site selection process and the planning year were examined.

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<sup>5</sup>Almost all stakeholders who were in that position at the time the interviews took place were interviewed. (At one school, a snow day and a death in the family prevented four stakeholder interviews from being completed; these were not rescheduled because of other commitments.) A few individuals who had been stakeholders left that position for personal reasons (for example, pregnancy) and were not interviewed. The roles of the stakeholders and the SIFs are described in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 2

# The Expansion Sites: Their Selection and Characteristics

### Introduction

Selecting sites was an essential early task of the Scaling Up First Things First demonstration. The original proposal to the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) called for First Things First to be implemented in two urban high schools and their associated middle schools, in two rural high schools, and in a medium-size school district.

At first, the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) planned to select the sites in two stages. The first stage was to include one of the urban high school and middle school combinations, one rural high school, and the district; the second stage, slated to occur a year later, was to include the second set of urban and rural schools. IRRE soon decided, however, that it would be both feasible and more cost-effective to select all the sites the first year.

In fact, site selection did take place in two stages, although not the two originally planned. The first stage unfolded between October 1999 and June 2000 and resulted in the selection of the two urban high schools and their associated middle schools as well as the two rural high schools called for by the OERI contract. But no suitable district site was found; the continuing search for such a site necessitated a second stage, which concluded successfully in June 2001. Both stages involved similar processes and activities, which are a principal subject of this chapter.

Next this chapter outlines the steps that IRRE took to identify prospective sites and to acquaint them with First Things First; it also considers the factors that influenced sites' decisions about whether or not to apply to be part of the initiative and the process for reaching these decisions. The chapter then presents salient demographic and education-related characteristics of the four sites and eight schools participating in the scaling-up effort (excluding the expansion schools in Kansas City, Kansas) and offers a brief profile of each school. The concluding section discusses differences among the schools along a number of dimensions related to school reform.

The discussion suggests a number of overarching themes:

- Site selection was a labor-intensive affair, typically involving multiple efforts at contact and many lengthy phone conversations, as the program developers and prospective sites explored the possibility of making a match.

- Site selection criteria involved both objective criteria of the extent of need and the developers' subjective judgments of local administrators' will and capacity to pull off a major reform.
- In most instances, the decision to adopt First Things First was made by district and school officials; at only one school did teachers formally vote on the intervention.
- Predictably, finding a medium-size school district with a number of high schools and middle schools willing to take on a comprehensive new initiative proved much more difficult than finding individual schools and smaller districts willing to do so.
- The site selection process yielded a group of schools that, while varying considerably in size and populations served, signed on with First Things First in the hope and expectation that the reform would increase students' academic achievement.
- As a group, teachers at the expansion schools had been in the classroom for many years — a factor that has been associated in the literature with resistance to reform.
- Just over half the teachers said that they had had no prior experience with school reform efforts; those who did report such experience tended to view past efforts in moderately positive terms.
- Asked to what extent the seven critical features of First Things First were in place before the initiative was implemented, the majority of teachers reported that their schools already had block scheduling and that high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards already existed in most or all classes.
- While teachers tended to perceive their principals as being responsive to staff, there was considerable variation among the schools in this respect.

## **The Site Selection Process: Key Activities and Considerations**

### **Initiating the Selection Process**

To guide its efforts, IRRE devised a set of site selection criteria, shown in Table 2.1, that represent a mix of objective and subjective considerations. The objective factors were largely demographic in nature: To make it more likely that the sites selected would benefit from

## Scaling Up First Things First

Table 2.1

### Criteria for Selecting the Expansion Sites

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#### Demographic criteria

##### Urban districts:

- A minimum of 10,000 and a maximum of 50,000 students
- At least 50 percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged (that is, eligible for free or reduced-price lunch)
- Up to six comprehensive high schools and up to twelve middle schools

##### Urban high schools and middle schools:

- Comprehensive high schools with a minimum of 1,000 students
- At least one middle school where 85 percent of the graduates attend the candidate high school
- Substantial percentage of students are economically disadvantaged

##### Rural high schools:

- A minimum of 350 students
- Substantial percentage of students are economically disadvantaged

#### Reform potential

#### Research infrastructure

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SOURCE: IRRE documents.

the kinds of reforms that First Things First offers, all the schools had to serve a substantial percentage of economically disadvantaged young people, and the urban schools had to be large ones, capable of being divided into several small learning communities (SLCs). Prospective sites' current and potential capacity to collect and use research data and their ability to meet the data requirements of the evaluation were also taken into account.<sup>1</sup> A more subjective factor was IRRE's assessment of each district's and school's potential to implement and sustain the critical features of First Things First.

From the beginning, IRRE recognized the importance of securing school district support for the implementation of a new reform. For this reason, in identifying prospective sites,

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<sup>1</sup>While the ability of sites to provide the data needed by the evaluation was explored during phone conversations and meetings with the sites, the evaluator was flexible on this score, and no sites were eliminated because of evaluation considerations.

IRRE drew in large measure on a cadre of consultants (known as the National Implementation Leadership Group, or NILG) who were familiar with developments and key personnel in state education agencies and school districts across the country. These individuals suggested potential demonstration candidates. In some instances, they also made phone calls to district administrators whom they knew personally to introduce First Things First and discuss the benefits of joining a national demonstration. Either the NILG member or IRRE then sent each district a letter congratulating it on its nomination, along with informational materials (including a 30-minute videotape describing the evolution of First Things First in Kansas City, Kansas) and an application kit; IRRE staff followed up with phone calls to explain the initiative more fully and to solicit interest. This approach, while labor-intensive, increased the likelihood that sites would first hear about the initiative from a known and trusted party — and that IRRE staff would similarly be perceived as credible and trustworthy.

IRRE never intended to embark on a comprehensive national search; nonetheless, some 70 sites in 28 states were ultimately nominated and contacted. Asked whether the level of effort involved in identifying the sites was about what had been expected, the Scaling Up demonstration manager replied that it had been “both less and more.” She explained:

We had anticipated considerably less interest in even initial discussions. But we also anticipated the process being easier and quicker for those that were interested. Instead, we got more inquiries than I would have thought, more responses, but the work was harder with each individual place. That’s because of what life is like for superintendents these days, the crises they have to manage. . . . The pressures on superintendents are pretty extraordinary. There truly is genuine interest, and they really do want to make their schools better. They aren’t satisfied with the status quo. But getting them out from under enough to focus on what to do about it, and on a particular thing to do about it, is extremely difficult.<sup>2</sup>

Repeated callbacks and rescheduled phone conversations were the norm. And when conversations did take place, they were often lengthy, as sites sought to learn more about First Things First before deciding whether or not to send in a letter of interest.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Evans (1996, p. 148) makes a similar point. Citing Bolman and Deal (1991, p. 29), Evans notes: “Running an organization seems to be a matter of solving an endless set of ‘messes.’ Efforts to exert leadership are usually cut short by the need to manage these messes.”

<sup>3</sup>Time spent on the phone was only part of what made site selection so labor-intensive for the demonstration developers. At each stage, materials — letters, interview protocols, meeting agendas, and so on — had to be drafted, reviewed, revised, printed, and prepared for use.

Some sites that were initially contacted were ruled out immediately, or ruled themselves out. Some were already engaged in school reform efforts and did not want to take on another initiative. Some sites were so remote from major population centers that it would have taken a full day to reach them — an inefficient use of the developer's staff time and resources. Some sites were judged unsuitable because they did not serve large enough numbers of low-income students or because of changing leadership. And some sites simply never returned repeated phone calls.

From the initial round of contacts, 16 sites opted to move on to the next stage. This involved submitting an application that included a formal letter of interest signed by the superintendent (as well as, for the urban and the rural school sites, letters of support signed by the principals) and data on their districts and students. In response, IRRE staff interviewed site personnel by phone to further explore eligibility and interest, and they subsequently conducted site visits to most of the applicants.

The site visits typically lasted a full day, with time allocated for presentations both by IRRE and by local officials. In describing First Things First to district personnel, IRRE staff discussed not only its critical features but also the key steps of the planning process. They noted, for example, that each school would participate in an introductory Roundtable meeting, that staff members would make choices about the structure of the schools, and that staff work groups would carry out the planning. As one IRRE staff member noted: "I learned a long time ago that you can't ask people to take this trip with you without laying out everything you know. We probably pushed harder on that — people understanding what they were getting into — than anything else."

As local officials talked about their districts and schools during the phone interviews and site visits, IRRE staff tried to assess the more subjective factors associated with site selection — motivation and capacity. They questioned district officials about the kinds of changes they thought were needed, about whether central office staff would be receptive, about whether the school board and principals would be supportive, and about the amount of resistance that ideas imported from outside would generate. They also probed to see whether officials were willing to discuss the critical features that entail a shift in power relationships (for example, devolving decisions about resource allocation to the small learning communities). They tried to judge whether the will to reform was so solid that the site would move forward with or without IRRE's assistance. And they looked for some degree of personal "chemistry" with the superintendents and principals — whether mutual respect existed between the parties, whether a successful working relationship might take hold.

In their phone conversations with site personnel, IRRE staff also inquired about the type and strength of local teachers' unions or associations. IRRE sought to ensure that key union of-



ficials knew about First Things First from the start, asking that union or association representatives be invited to attend the site visit meetings. In the end, few sites that applied to be part of the demonstration had strong unions. As the demonstration manager commented, "We didn't eliminate places with strong unions; they mostly eliminated themselves" — perhaps recognizing that the reforms of First Things First would bring on a tougher battle than district officials wanted to wage.<sup>4</sup>

At the conclusion of the site visits, seven sites — one district, two urban sites with high schools and their linked middle schools, and four rural sites — were invited to a Roundtable meeting held in Kansas City, Kansas, in May 2000.

### **The Sites' Perspective**

Site representatives came to the Roundtable with varying degrees of familiarity with First Things First. District officials in Greenville and Shaw, for example, first heard about the initiative from an official in the Mississippi Department of Education who had previously been the Greenville superintendent. They learned more when IRRE staff visited their sites.

Representatives of one site attending the Roundtable were already quite knowledgeable about First Things First and committed to its implementation; indeed, they actively wooed IRRE to be selected for the demonstration. The superintendent of the Riverview Gardens School District had first heard about the initiative in October 1999 as a participant in a Missouri school superintendents' forum at which Jim Connell made a presentation about the program. Her district had received only provisional accreditation from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education because of low student test scores and attendance, and while the district's elementary schools were showing improvements, the secondary schools were not. Earlier in the year, high school administrators had held a retreat and discussed the need to restructure the school, to create closer relationships between teachers and students, and to raise student achievement.

Impressed by what she heard at the forum, the superintendent sent a three-person team — including the assistant superintendent for secondary instruction, the high school principal, and a longtime, well-respected teacher at the high school — to a Roundtable held in Kansas City, Kansas, for the second group of schools in that district to implement the initiative. The trio returned highly enthusiastic about what they had learned and immediately began strategizing

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<sup>4</sup>While about 90 percent of the nation's public school teachers are represented by the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers, the strength of teacher unions varies considerably by region and by state (Duplantis, Chandler, and Geske, 1995). The South, where three of the initiative's four expansion sites are located, has a notably weak teacher union presence (Steelman, Powell, and Carini, 2000).



about how to introduce First Things First to their colleagues in a way that would maximize acceptance. Among other activities, they disseminated literature on the merits of small learning communities and increased instructional time and talked about these readings in both formal and informal staff meetings. They screened the 30-minute videotape on the Kansas City, Kansas, experience with First Things First and brought staff from the Kansas City initiative to Riverview Gardens for small-group discussions. Finally, the Riverview Gardens School District dug into its coffers to find the funds to send three additional groups — comprising teachers, administrators, board members, central office staff members, and parents — to visit Wyandotte High School. By the time of the May 2000 Roundtable, district officials and other educational leaders in Riverview Gardens were convinced that First Things First was the reform for them.

Whatever their level of familiarity with First Things First, all site representatives attending the Roundtable were attracted to the initiative by the same basic motive: its potential for improving students' academic achievement. Asked why Shaw, Mississippi, had decided to adopt First Things First, the superintendent replied:

Because of the low test scores in math and reading. Because of the dropout rate in grades 8 and 9. Because of high discipline referrals to the office. And most of all, to provide the students a greater opportunity for educational success.

His counterpart in Greenville, Mississippi, echoed the sentiment:

As we analyzed our data and looked at the direction we wanted to go, we knew there were certain things we had to do in terms of reducing the dropout rate and increasing graduation and student achievement. We had goals and objectives, but needed something else to enhance the activities we already had in place.

The program appealed to the Greenville superintendent for another reason: It was consistent with his desire to improve educational opportunities for Greenville youth by consolidating the district's two zoned high schools.<sup>5</sup> The previous superintendent had also favored such a merger but had run into such opposition from the community that he was forced to back down. His successor recognized that First Things First could be implemented in a single high school with two campuses, with different small learning communities located in the two buildings.

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<sup>5</sup>Among other things, this would allow all students to take advantage of new, state-of-the-art science labs at one of the schools.

Along with its promise of better outcomes, First Things First offered a process for reaching those outcomes, and this also appealed to the key players at the sites. Said a district official in Houston:

We had an idea of where we wanted to go, but we couldn't get a grasp on how to get there. . . . What appealed to me in Kansas City was the year of planning — there was a structured process for getting from Point A to Point B. That really appealed to me, because that was where we were having trouble.

### **The Roundtable and Its Aftermath**

The Roundtable gave the prospective sites and IRRE another opportunity to look each other over. And because IRRE expected each site attending the Roundtable to send at least seven people — the superintendent, a designated liaison (“point person”) from the district, the principal of each participating school, a school board member, a teacher, a representative from the teachers’ union or association, and a parent or student — the meeting helped ensure that a diverse group of interested parties would learn more about both what the intervention could offer and what it would demand.<sup>6</sup>

Those attending first heard Jim Connell’s overview of the rationale for First Things First and its critical features, along with disturbing data on the high proportions of students in high-poverty schools who are at risk of failure and dropping out. Especially engaging were a panel of students from Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, and from Central Park East Secondary School in New York City and a second panel composed of teachers from the two schools. Audience members were clearly impressed by the sincerity and sense of purpose of the young people as they talked about how close they felt to their teachers, how the climate in their school had changed, and how, in some cases, First Things First had helped them turn around scholastic careers that had previously been marked by failure. Although students had been prepared beforehand for the panel, they were not generally the “cream of the crop,” and after they left the room, Connell challenged the listeners to identify the students who were enrolled in special education classes. Participants also toured some of the Kansas City, Kansas, schools to look at implementation and to talk with principals, teachers, and students in less structured settings. Large blocks of time were allotted for site teams to network with each other and to ask questions of IRRE staff. Finally, the Roundtable included a briefing on the project’s research requirements and a detailing of the next steps.

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<sup>6</sup>Every participating site brought at least that complement, and some brought larger groups. Initially, IRRE anticipated that the sites would defray the cost of the trip, but this proved infeasible; some sites simply could not afford to send such a large group, especially so late in the school year. Ultimately, IRRE used outside resources to pay for four people from each site to attend; others came at the districts’ expense.

The success of the Roundtable in generating and sustaining support for participation in the demonstration is evident in the fact that six of the seven sites that attended the meeting submitted a letter of commitment to take part in the scaling-up effort. The exception was the school district that attended the Roundtable; although many officials and principals favored adopting the reform, there were also widespread doubts about whether resistance to it could be overcome without unduly compromising the initiative. With the district's decision to withdraw, IRRE had to renew its search for suitable candidates for this position.

IRRE also had to decide which two of the four rural sites at the Roundtable it wanted to go with. It opted for the two Mississippi Delta communities, which were economically needier than their rural rivals. A further consideration was that because the Mississippi sites were less than 25 miles apart, they could be visited together, making for greater efficiency.

At the end of the first round of site selection, then, two urban sites — the Riverview Gardens School District in Saint Louis County, Missouri (the high school and its two middle school feeders) and a high school and middle school in Houston, Texas — along with three rural high schools in Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, emerged the winners.<sup>7</sup> The characteristics of these sites are discussed below. Here, however, it is worth noting that while a larger district remained to be found, three of the four sites selected in the first round (all but Houston) encompassed all the high schools in their respective districts.

### **The Issue of Staff Buy-In: To Vote or Not to Vote**

While the Roundtable process ensured that a representative group of administrators, teachers, school board members, and others in the school community would hear a good deal about First Things First, the decision to undertake the initiative rested with the district officials and principals of the participating schools, in consultation with a few other key players. IRRE did not require, or even recommend, a schoolwide vote on adoption. Connell argued that buy-in from district and school leadership was sufficient to move the process forward.

In only one instance did the full faculty of a participating school vote on the matter. The principal of Riverview Gardens High School believed that it was essential to win teachers' commitment to the initiative through a formal ballot. In this regard, the fact that Riverview Gardens had learned about First Things First long before the other sites did worked to the principal's advantage: He had the better part of an academic year to ply teachers with information

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<sup>7</sup>Contrary to the original plan, the Houston middle school that was selected was not a major feeder for the high school. The principal of the middle school that was the high school's most important feeder was categorically opposed to the concept of continuity of care and made it clear to IRRE staff that he would not implement that particular critical feature. In contrast, the principal of the middle school that was ultimately selected strongly supported First Things First and pressed to have her school join the initiative.

about the program and win their endorsement. In consultation with IRRE staff, the principal sought to secure the support of 85 percent of the faculty; when the ballot finally took place, 98 percent of the teachers voted in favor of adopting First Things First.

In Houston and the two Mississippi sites, district and school administrators noted the need to move quickly as a factor impeding a fuller discussion of the topic among all faculty members. As one top district official put it:

As superintendent, it's my job to plan and forecast the needs of the district and to set the vision for the district. I saw that as the task of this office. Once we had bought it, then it was our task to sell it to others. . . . I didn't want to take a vote, because I knew it would take a whole year for everybody to buy into First Things First, and that would have meant we lost a whole year.

A principal voiced a similar rationale for top-down decision-making: "We don't have two or three years to study. Two years becomes three or four."

The two Riverview Gardens middle schools had not expected to be part of First Things First, and when word came that they would be included in the scaling-up effort, it was too late to conduct the same kind of intensive consensus-building campaign that had taken place at the high school. Thus, although a number of middle school teachers — including the local NEA chapter president — pressed for a vote, no administrators pushed for it, and a faculty-wide vote on adopting the program did not take place at these schools.

Clearly, teachers must buy into an education reform like First Things First if it is to be effective. But the school change literature suggests that the initial stages of reform, including the adoption decision, do not require widespread teacher involvement. Indeed, participation and a sense of empowerment may develop only after the change process is under way.<sup>8</sup> Since only one site opted for a formal vote, the experience of the expansion sites can shed only limited light on the importance of this mechanism for securing initial staff support for and ownership of the intervention.

### **Continuing the Search for the District**

Finding a district willing to make First Things First the centerpiece of its secondary school reform efforts proved to be difficult and time-consuming and involved the same kinds of activities as had been undertaken the previous year: multiple and extended phone conversations with district officials, site visits, and ultimately another Roundtable for the two finalists. What made the process all the more arduous was the fact that, at the same time, project developers

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<sup>8</sup>Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991, Chapter 5.

were moving forward with planning activities at the sites that had already been selected and were also providing ongoing technical assistance to the Kansas City, Kansas, district. The capacities of IRRE's small central staff were unquestionably stretched.

Essentially, the challenge in selecting the district, as with choosing the individual schools, was to find a site where there was a high level of commitment and competence on the part of both central office staff and principals of the participating schools. The challenge was compounded by the fact that, naturally, there were more personalities to contend with and more sets of interests to be reconciled. Thus, in one site, the superintendent, who was new to the district, favored adopting First Things First but was unwilling to take a strong position so early in his tenure against several school principals who believed the intervention was too radical and unnecessary. In another district, the principals who were most enthusiastic about the initiative and would have provided the strongest leadership did not head the schools that served the largest numbers of low-income students. In a third site, an assistant superintendent charged with overseeing reform efforts took a dislike to the program developers. In yet another district, several assistant superintendents expressed serious doubts that the program could be pulled off successfully.

Although Houston hardly meets the definition of a middle-size school district as put forth by the program developers — it is, in fact, the eighth-largest district in the country — key officials there had, from the outset, made clear their interest in expanding First Things First beyond the two schools already selected. Given the problems associated with locating a suitable district, IRRE sought permission from OERI to move into six additional schools in Houston (three high schools and three middle schools) and to have Houston count as the district site. But-tressing IRRE's argument was the fact that the eight schools collectively served over 14,000 mostly minority and low-income students — just the population for whom First Things First was designed. OERI consented, and, in June 2001, Houston officially became the "district" stipulated by the initial contract. At the same time, OERI agreed that IRRE would not have to replace Houston's first-round high school and middle school with a different urban high school and middle school.

## **The Expansion Schools and Their Communities**

This section begins with an overview of the districts and schools participating in the scaling-up effort. Tables 2.2 and 2.3 summarize salient characteristics of the districts and schools, respectively. As Table 2.2 makes clear, the target communities are strikingly diverse in terms of scale, ethnic mix of the population, per pupil expenditures, and other characteristics. An important similarity is that, at the time of site selection, three of the four district superintendents were well established in their office, having held that position for six years (although one

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 2.2**

### Selected Characteristics of School Districts

Characteristic	Houston	Riverview Gardens	Greenville	Shaw
Census 2000 population of town, city, or district	1,953,631	43,530	41,633	2,312
Ethnic distribution of population				
White, non-Hispanic	30.8	40.2	28.7	7.1
Black, non-Hispanic	25.0	57.5	69.3	91.6
Hispanic	37.4	0.0	0.7	1.0
Asian	5.3	0.0	0.7	0.1
Native American/Other	0.3	2.3 <sup>a</sup>	0.1	0.0
Unemployment rate for 2000	5.1	2.8 <sup>b</sup>	9.4	8.2 <sup>c</sup>
Number of students enrolled in public schools, September 2000	208,462	7,587	7,752	845
Per pupil expenditure (\$), 2000-2001 school year	7,096	6,507	5,613	7,004
Number of schools involved in First Things First				
Middle schools	1 <sup>d</sup>	2		
High schools	1	1	1 <sup>e</sup>	1
Tenure of superintendent as of June 2000 (years)	6	6	2	6

SOURCES: United States Census Bureau, Census 2000, information from Web site: <http://www.census.gov>.  
Texas Education Agency, information from Web site: <http://www.tea.state.tx.us>.  
Board of Education, Houston, TX.  
Mississippi State Department of Education.  
Mississippi Employment Security Commission.  
Missouri Department of Education.  
MDRC Field Research Reports.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

<sup>a</sup>Includes Hispanics, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. These groups could not be disaggregated from the available data.

<sup>b</sup>The unemployment rate is for St. Louis County.

<sup>c</sup>The unemployment rate is for Bolivar County, the county in which Shaw is located.

<sup>d</sup>In Houston, at the conclusion of the planning year, three additional middle schools and three additional high schools were selected to implement First Things First.

<sup>e</sup>In Greenville, two separate high schools were combined to form one high school on two campuses.

# Scaling Up First Things First

Table 2.3

## Selected Characteristics of Schools

Characteristic	Houston, TX		Riverview Gardens, MO			Greenville, MS		Shaw, MS	
	Lee High School	Sharpstown Middle School	High School	Gardens School	Central Middle School	East Middle School	High School	High School	Shaw High School
Total number of students, fall 2000	2,079	1,054	1,717	829	349	1,030	604	314	
Ethnic distribution of students (%)									
White, non-Hispanic	8.0	8.0	10.0	13.0	0.1	0.2	1.3	1.0	
Black, non-Hispanic	11.0	23.0	89.0	86.0	99.9	99.8	98.7	99.0	
Hispanic	75.0	61.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.0	8.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Native American/Other	0.1	1.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
Students eligible for free/reduced-price lunches (%)	82.0	88.0	52.0	64.0	93.0	69.0	81.0	94.0	
Students with limited ability to speak English (%)	29.0	33.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	
Student-teacher ratio	30:1	26:1	17:1	26:1	19:1	17:1	12:1	12:1	

(continued)



Table 2.3 (continued)

Characteristic	Houston, TX		Riverview Gardens, MO			Greenville, MS		Shaw, MS
	Lee High School	Sharpstown Middle School	Riverview High School	Gardens Middle School	Central Middle School	Greenville High School	T. L. Weston High School	
Total number of teachers	120	88	113	62	30	60	50	27
Ethnic distribution of classroom staff <sup>a</sup> (%), 2001								
White, non-Hispanic	49.1	46.0	72.6	50.9	33.3	34.0	23.9	19.2
Black, non-Hispanic	29.5	44.4	25.0	43.4	62.5	62.9	73.9	80.8
Hispanic	10.7	4.8	0.0	1.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Asian	6.3	1.6	0.0	3.8	0.0	1.6	2.2	0.0
Native American/Other	4.5	3.2	2.4	0.0	4.2	1.6	0.0	0.0
Prior experience of classroom staff <sup>a</sup> (%), 2001								
0-2 years	16.2	26.9	8.8	10.5	14.3	15.2	15.2	23.1
3-10 years	24.3	34.6	47.3	50.9	46.4	31.8	37.0	19.2
11-20 years	27.0	23.1	22.0	22.8	28.6	16.7	28.3	11.5
More than 20 years	32.4	15.4	22.0	15.8	10.7	36.4	19.6	46.2
Tenure of principal as of June 2000 (years)	1	8	2	-- <sup>b</sup>	2	2	3	-- <sup>b</sup>

SOURCES: MDRRC Field Research Reports.

2001 First Things First staff survey.

Riverview Gardens School District.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

<sup>a</sup>Classroom staff include regular subject teachers, ESL and special education teachers, paraprofessionals and teachers aides, and anyone else with classroom responsibilities.

<sup>b</sup>-- indicates that a new principal assumed this position at the start of the planning year.



of the three, the Houston superintendent, left some months later to become Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education).

In the fall of 2000, the eight schools differed greatly in the number of students enrolled (Table 2.3). All eight, however, served predominantly nonwhite students: mostly African-American students in Riverview Gardens and the Mississippi schools, and mostly Hispanic students in the two Houston schools. The majority of these students were poor (as evidenced by their eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches), and, in Houston, about one-third were limited in their ability to speak English.

Table 2.4 presents IRRE estimates of the percentages of students in the schools or districts in two categories.<sup>9</sup> The first category includes students who, on the basis of high attendance and solid reading test scores (or, in Houston, reading and math test scores), were deemed to have a very high likelihood of graduating from high school. At all but one school, one-tenth of the students or less fell into this group. The second category includes students who, on the basis of poor attendance and low test scores, were considered to be at high risk for dropping out. Between 24 percent and 65 percent of all students, depending on school and grade cohort, fell into this high-risk group.

Another look at Table 2.3 shows that, across all schools, 66 percent of the classroom teachers were female, and 34 percent were male. There were virtually identical proportions of African-American and white teachers — 46 percent each — with blacks constituting the majority of the staff in the three Mississippi schools and in East Middle School in Riverview Gardens. All eight schools had higher proportions of white teachers than white students. Particularly notable is the low proportion of Hispanic teachers at Lee High School and Sharpstown Middle School in Houston, both of which have predominantly Hispanic student populations.

Many schools had a sizable proportion of staff members who had been in place for many years and who had considerable experience in the classroom. Across schools, almost half (48 percent) had taught for more than 10 years, and one-quarter had taught for more than 20 years. This is important because research suggests that veteran teachers are especially likely to resist change that is imposed on them, even when they are unhappy with their present situation. Teachers who are middle-aged and have years of experience tend to be risk-averse and more skeptical about reform efforts than new, young teachers.<sup>10</sup> Observations from the field also suggest that more experienced teachers often get plum assignments (for example, teaching Advanced Placement classes), feel satisfied with their instructional practices, and believe that they

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<sup>9</sup>The approach to creating these risk categories is described in Bridges and Connell (1999).

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, Evans, 1996; Sarason, 1996.

**Scaling Up First Things First**  
**Table 2.4**  
**Student Achievement in the Districts and Schools**

Location, Student Group, and Date	Percentage of Students Considered	
	Optimal for Graduation	High Risk for Dropping Out
<b>Houston, TX</b>		
Sharpstown Middle School		
Students in grades 6 through 8, 1997-1998	17	59
Lee High School		
Students in grades 9 through 11, 1998-1999	10	58
<b>Riverview Gardens, MO</b>		
Students in grade 7, 1998-1999	8	33
Students in grade 11, 1998-1999	7	42
<b>Greenville, MS</b>		
Greenville High School		
Students in grade 9, 1996-1997	6	48
Students in grade 10, 1997-1998	1	33
Students in grade 11, 1998-1999	3	27
T. L. Weston High School		
Students in grade 9, 1998-1999	3	65
Students in grade 11, 1998-1999	3	38
<b>Shaw, MS</b>		
Students in grades 9 and 10, 1998-1999	2	52
Students in grades 10 and 11, 1998-1999	7	24

SOURCE: IRRE calculations from school district data.

are successful; they are therefore resistant to reforms that could potentially change who, what, and how they teach.

Two schools began the planning year with newly appointed principals at the helm. All but one of the six remaining schools had principals who were relatively new to their positions, having held them for three years or less.

## Profiles of the Target Districts and Schools

Statistics tell only part of the story. This section aims to paint a word-picture of the districts and schools and to describe the features that make them distinctive.

### Houston (Texas)

Houston is a sprawling international business center that is the fourth-largest city in the United States. Although primarily based on petrochemical production, Houston's economy has diversified to include medical research and health care delivery, high technology, international imports and exports, commercial fishing, banking and finance, and manufacturing and distribution.

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is divided into 11 decentralized districts. Lee High School and Sharpstown Middle School are both located in the populous West District, which enrolls some 21,000 students out of 210,000 in the greater Houston area. Once solely an enclave of the affluent middle class, this is a changing landscape that is now home to an ever-growing multiethnic community, reflected in the local Indian, Middle Eastern, and Southeast Asian businesses found in the numerous strip malls within its borders. The housing stock is diverse, including both upper-middle and middle-class suburban homes and large pockets of recently built apartment complexes that already look worn. The latter serve as a temporary haven for incoming immigrants housed there by government refugee resettlement programs.

During the 1990s, HISD became known as a leader in districtwide urban school reform.<sup>11</sup> But because of the former affluence of their surroundings, Lee High School and Sharpstown Middle School were largely overlooked by earlier reform initiatives. Both serve large numbers of students from poor families; families in the area who have more money send their children either to private schools or to a new, predominantly white high school and do not provide much community support to Lee and Sharpstown. Both schools have large populations of students in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, and teachers in both schools see the broad cultural diversity of the student body as both a strength and a challenge. Although many of these students are hungry to learn, they face many obstacles. Coming from newly arrived immigrant families who are often fleeing civil war and political unrest in their homelands, many students live in great poverty, and some have never been to school before or had any formal education. Gang activities also make for violence in the neighborhoods, although gang violence has been kept out of the schools. The City of Houston has an antigang and antidrug task force working in the area, but assaults and drive-by shootings are not uncommon.

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<sup>11</sup>See Paige and Sclafani, 2001.

**Lee High School.** Built in 1963, Lee High School is greatly in need of renovation; parts have been condemned. The bathrooms and air-conditioners need repairs, and, in some rooms, streams of rust run down moldy walls as the building succumbs to the natural decay of the humid, subtropical environment. The prefabricated temporary buildings behind the school are uninviting but house new air-conditioners.

In the classrooms, the dreariness of the halls gives way to colorful displays of posters, student work, and students' clothing. Represented within the classrooms are students from 63 nations. Substantial numbers come from Bosnia, Russia, Armenia, Vietnam, various African and Middle Eastern countries, and all the Hispanic nations; the last group makes up more than half the student body. At the start of the initiative's planning year, Lee lost 1,000 students — many from families with greater means — to a newly built school; half the remaining student population then consisted of special education students, ESL students, or students who were in both programs.

At the time that Lee was selected for First Things First, a new principal had been in place for one year, and the school had started along the path to reform. Prompted by the West District superintendent, staff began planning a reform initiative, known as Lee 2000, which included the creation of small learning communities and was slated to get under way in the fall of 2000. Lee 2000 was set aside when district and school officials decided to adopt First Things First instead.

**Sharpstown Middle School.** Sharpstown Middle School is situated in a middle-class neighborhood of modest, well-kept homes. Across the street is a large and well-endowed Chinese Buddhist center that houses two temples, a small school, living quarters for resident nuns and priests, and conference halls that the Buddhists allow Sharpstown and an adjacent elementary school to use for meetings. The original two-story, yellow-brick building was built in 1968, and a number of prefabricated temporary classrooms have been added on either side. The main building is laid out in wings, with rooms opening off patios and pleasant gardens in a central courtyard; students maintain a hydroponics garden as part of a science project. Although the edifice is in need of repair, staff have worked to brighten the place with colorful displays of students' work. Eighty countries are represented in the school, and Sharpstown is notable for having the highest proportion of ESL students of all the Houston schools — in a city where most schools have a significant ESL population.

The principal has been in that position since 1992.

### **Riverview Gardens (Missouri)**

The name "Riverview Gardens" does not appear on any map of Missouri. Rather, the Riverview Gardens School District serves seven incorporated communities (one of which is the

Village of Riverview) and occupies an area of about 12 square miles of St. Louis County to the northern limits of St. Louis City. According to 1999 federal figures, the population of the city and county together was 1,345,464. While the school district's population is difficult to ascertain precisely, it enrolls just under 8,000 students in grades kindergarten through 12. Like other cities along the Mississippi River founded by French traders and missionaries, St. Louis still has a large Catholic population and many Catholic schools, and about 1,000 students residing in the district attend the four Catholic, one Lutheran, and one nonsectarian private grade schools within the district's borders. It is likely that many graduates of these schools go on to enroll in parochial or other private high schools.

A school district official comments that the Riverview Gardens School District is located "north, east, south and west of any place that has money" — a reference to the absence of large industries or corporations within the district's borders that could contribute to the tax base of the communities. The district occupies a suburban area that lies partly along the Mississippi River, in what was mostly a rural area until about the 1940s. Now it is filled with houses, apartment buildings, strip malls, and small service businesses of all kinds — groceries, taverns, hairdressers and barbers, pharmacies, gas stations, and various ethnic and chain restaurants. The residents of the school district work in all the industries and businesses found in the St. Louis area, including health care and educational institutions, manufacturing, banking and financial services, and retail businesses. Many residents are employed in skilled-labor positions at the Boeing aerospace engineering plant located in north St. Louis County or at the Chrysler plant in nearby north St. Louis City.

The population today is mostly African-American, although a decade ago it was mostly white. Since the late 1970s, area residents have been migrating in a steady stream out of the City of Saint Louis and into the North County area, as better job opportunities enabled many families to leave city neighborhoods that were becoming increasingly troubled by gangs, drug use, and violence for the quieter and safer suburban neighborhoods served by the Riverview Gardens School District. The general character of the district is one of small brick or frame houses in clean and neat neighborhoods where home repair or improvement projects are often under way, children are playing in yards and on sidewalks, and residents in most neighborhoods are seen working in their yards. But there is also a small section of depressed-looking, poorly maintained streets where the houses have bars on doors and windows — as well as a few beautiful, large, 1940s-era, architect-designed brick homes set off by expansive lawns.

The public school student population — about 85 percent black and 15 percent white, with a smattering of "other" — comes from families whose incomes tend to be higher than those of their counterparts who live in the city and lower than those of families living in other parts of St. Louis County. About 70 percent of the students in the district qualify for reduced-price or free lunches.

At the time of site selection for First Things First, the superintendent had been in office for six years. Under her guidance and with the assistance of an outside consultant, the district implemented a program called Write Focus that requires all teachers to implement structured writing assignments on an almost daily basis in all classes, in order to increase students' mastery of writing skills. Longer written assignments are graded monthly, and, to measure progress, every month each school graphs the average writing scores (which are based on state standards) for each grade level, in each discipline.

**Riverview Gardens High School.** Opened in 1959 to accommodate a growing student population, Riverview Gardens High School comprises nine buildings on a large campus within a residential neighborhood on the northeastern edge of the school district. The buildings are in generally good repair, although their interior walls, constructed of painted concrete blocks, contribute to a somewhat institutional atmosphere. Teachers also complain that the physical facility is inadequate, with classroom space generally tight; there is not enough room in the auditorium for the whole school to meet at one time, so that school assemblies have to take place in shifts.

When classes are in session, very few students are to be found, nor sounds heard, in the hallways. During passing periods, however — when the halls resound with student laughter, screams, and shouts and banging locker doors — the principal, four assistant principals, and two “walking counselors” use walkie-talkies constantly to regulate student movement throughout the campus. Between classes, teachers stand in hallways shouting orders for students to move on to their next classroom.

At the time of site selection for First Things First, the principal had been in the position for two years. Initially, his relationship with the faculty was strained. Over time, however, he and the staff have shaped each other and responded to each other's needs — in particular, he is perceived as giving staff a great deal of say in decision-making — so that an unusually high level of loyalty has developed between the principal and the faculty. Overall, this is a large and friendly campus, where teachers seem to work well together and care about their students, whom they frequently perceive as lacking in motivation or family support.

**Central Middle School.** With some 830 students, Central is the larger of two middle schools in the Riverview Gardens School District. It was built in 1961 and is located on a large campus in a clean and quiet residential neighborhood near the district's central office. A municipal police officer is on duty at the school to deter student fights. The school has well-equipped computer and science labs, a number of extracurricular activities to offer students, adequate numbers of textbooks, and plenty of office and conference space. The school began the planning year of First Things First with a new principal, who was hired from outside the district.



Prior to the implementation of First Things First, Central Middle School's faculty and students were divided into six teams of about 138 students each, an arrangement that the faculty felt worked well for them and for the students.

**East Middle School.** Located on a busy thoroughfare in a residential neighborhood, East Middle School was originally the high school in the Riverview Gardens School District. The school was transformed from a sixth-grade center to a middle school at the start of the 2000 school year, due to changing dynamics in the district's student population. Many of the sixth-grade teachers stayed on to teach the seventh- and eighth-graders, and several teachers transferred to East from Central Middle School, which prior to August 2000 had been the district's only middle school.

Built in 1924, the old brick building is in need of many repairs: Bathrooms are usually functional, but fixtures are old and sometimes broken, and the heating system is hard to regulate (when the weather turns cold, some areas of the building feel stuffy, while others are drafty). The district is currently evaluating whether to invest in needed repairs or to raze the building and construct a new facility — a decision complicated by the fact that the district is experiencing a big increase in its student population and expects this trend to continue for at least a few years.

East Middle School has not been able to get the same kinds of instructional resources — for example, upgraded computer and science labs — as the larger Central Middle School, and its one copy machine is often broken. Textbooks never seem to be in sufficient supply. All these things, combined with the age of the facility, engender a belief among staff members that the district is treating their school like something of a “stepchild.”

Despite all this, the atmosphere at East Middle School is that of a small community of caring adults and enthusiastic students, and, in this respect, the school's small size has worked in its favor. At the end of the planning year of First Things First, the school's principal resigned to accept a position in another district and was replaced by a longtime district employee who had been an assistant principal at the high school before assuming this role.

### **Greenville (Mississippi)**

The Greenville School District, located in Washington County, Mississippi, serves a population of 41,633 residents who reside within the City of Greenville, the largest city in the Mississippi Delta. According to the 2000 census, 70 percent of Greenville's population are African-American, and 35 percent are under the age of 20. Known as “the Port City,” Greenville is at the heart of a heavily rural area; on its outskirts are farms where cotton remains king. Much of the local economy is related to agriculture and the processing of agricultural products. Banking, finance, and commerce on the Mississippi River are also important, and in recent years riverboat gambling has become a prominent addition to the mix.

A series of court desegregation orders in the early 1970s failed to result in integration of the district's public schools. Instead, most white students transferred to private schools or other school districts, leaving a public school population that is almost entirely African-American.

With the advent of First Things First, school district administrators decided to follow through on a plan of action that they had long discussed but had previously been unable to implement: merging the district's two high schools. Beginning in the 2001-2002 school year, Greenville High School and T. L. Weston High School have been formally combined into Greenville-Weston High School, a single school with two separate campuses. Because this merger was not completed within the period covered by this report and because the two schools have quite different histories and traditions, they are considered separately here.

**Greenville High School.** Traditionally the city's "white" high school, Greenville High School is located in a middle-class neighborhood, adjacent to a large, predominantly white church. Immediately in front of the school are a public park and the offices of the Greenville Park Commission.

The Greenville campus consists of the original section built in 1954 — a two-story building with narrow halls lined by traditional classrooms — and a new wing of state-of-the-art science classrooms and laboratories. A new brick façade and a large entrance area tie the two parts together visually and functionally.

At the time of site selection for First Things First, Greenville's principal, a former math and physics teacher, had held that position for two years.

**T. L. Weston High School.** Named after Thulla Lewis Weston — a retired African-American elementary school principal who was the district's first black educator to earn a master's degree and who served the district for 41 years — T. L. Weston High School was built in 1964 to relieve overcrowding in what was then the "black" high school on the other side of town. The school is located in a lower socioeconomic neighborhood than Greenville High School's, and a large low-rent housing complex lies adjacent to the campus on the west side of the school. According to one knowledgeable observer, social class differences were an important factor contributing to the controversy that surrounded T. L. Weston's merger with Greenville High School and that wracked the community for much of the initiative's planning year.

The one-story building features a gray brick front, wide halls with an open feeling, and a recently added wing of classrooms. An administrative area and a large library with trophies displayed above bookshelves are located in the center of the building. As well as offering regular high school courses, the school also provides instruction to students preparing to take the General Educational Development (GED) test; these students attend classes in portable classrooms on the east side of the campus.



The principal, a former social studies teacher, had held that position for three years when the school embarked on First Things First.

### **Shaw (Mississippi)**

The Shaw School District, located in Bolivar County, Mississippi (about 22 miles from Greenville), serves a small, rural, almost entirely (92 percent) African-American population of 8,419 residents. On U.S. Highway 61, by which one approaches the town, the speed limit is 45 miles per hour, and there are no stop or caution lights on the highway or in the town.

It is abundantly clear that the small town has significant economic problems. Two access streets that lead “downtown” from the highway are lined on either side by drainage ditches and old houses that vaguely reflect the prosperity of the original owners; now, the houses and their surrounding yards look poorly maintained. In the four-block downtown area, most of the stores are abandoned. Only four businesses appear to be doing well: a small bank branch, a wholesale tobacco and candy distributor, an auto parts store, and a cotton-gin company.

Although large cotton and soybean farms are the major economic resource in the area, most of the working population is employed in neighboring towns, such as Greenville, Leland, Indianola, and Cleveland. Most professional staff members of the Shaw School District reside outside the district’s boundaries.

**Shaw High School.** The building that now serves as the high school originally housed grades 1 through 12. Erected in 1923, the school was an extravagant architectural expression of the value placed on education for white children. The building, of ochre brick, was very ornate, with stained glass windows and copper flashings edging the roof. The façade featured a molded concrete book above each of the two entrances and two large concrete spheres resting in leaves on either side of the steps. A gym was attached to the main building by a brick walkway. Subsequent additions included a cafeteria, an administrative office building, and a vocational shop, all with matching brick. The vocational building has since been converted into two computer labs.

In 1968, the desegregation of the faculty and student body began with the employment of an African-American teacher and the enrollment of four African-American students. Soon after, Shaw became the high school for the school district, and McEvans — the school for black students and teachers before desegregation — became the elementary school. As in Greenville, “desegregation” really meant “resegregation,” as most white teachers and students left the school district to enter private and public schools in neighboring cities.

The interior of the school retains much of its original appearance. Old wooden book racks and blown-up photographs of past graduating classes (many all-white) line the walls above iron radiators that are still used, although modern metal lockers have also been installed. The dimly lit halls and stairs to the second floor retain their original design, although almost 80 years of wear and tear have taken their toll.

At the start of the planning year of First Things First (2000-2001), the school board appointed a new principal who had formerly been an assistant principal in another district in the state.

## **Factors Affecting Reform at the Expansion Schools**

The literature on school reform points to a number of factors (including teachers' experience levels) that contribute to the ease or difficulty with which changes are adopted and implemented. In exploring the similarities and differences among the expansion schools, this section considers several factors that may influence teachers' receptivity to change. The discussion relies principally on data from the staff survey but also draws on interview data where appropriate. Chapter 4 reexamines many of these factors to see what light, if any, they shed on staff members' early responses to First Things First.

**Prior experience with school reform efforts.** It would be reasonable to expect teachers' responses to First Things First to vary depending on whether they had experienced school change efforts in the past and whether they believed that those reforms had been effective. The literature suggests that when prior reforms have failed, or have made little difference in student performance, teachers become more reluctant to undertake new efforts and are all too likely to become "burnt out," feeling that the situation is hopeless and that nothing can improve it.<sup>12</sup>

In answer to a question on the staff survey, just over half the respondents (53 percent) said that they had never been involved in any school reform efforts — reflecting both that IRRE deliberately chose schools that had not yet undergone major reform and that the teachers had long tenure in these schools.<sup>13</sup> The teachers who did report involvement with reform efforts tended to view them favorably, although not overwhelmingly so: Only 12 percent said that past reforms had been very effective, while another 47 percent said that they had had some positive effects. About a third said that the reforms had made little or no difference, and 7 percent said that the effects had been mostly negative.

**Prior implementation of the initiative's critical features.** The spring staff survey asked about the extent to which each of the critical features of First Things First had already been implemented in their schools — whether the features had been put in place in a few, some, most, all, or no classes. Table 2.5 indicates that block scheduling (having class periods last more than one hour and an aspect of "continuity of care") was in place at seven of the eight schools.

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<sup>12</sup>Evans, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>Some 22 percent of survey respondents did not answer this question, possibly because the layout of the survey was somewhat ambiguous. It seems likely that most of these individuals also lacked prior experience with reform efforts.

# Scaling Up First Things First

Table 2.5

Staff Assessments of the Presence of the Initiative's Critical Features at Baseline

Critical Feature	Reported in Place in Most or All Classrooms by Majority of Staff in School							
	Lee High School	Sharpstown Middle School	Riverview Gardens High School	Central Middle School	East Middle School	Greenville High School	T. L. Weston High School	Shaw High School
Lowered student-teacher ratios or 10 hours/week in math and literacy								
Small, continuous learning communities for same students and teachers				X				
Class periods lasting more than one hour	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
High, fair, clear student conduct standards	X	X	X		X	X		X
High, fair, clear academic standards		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Opportunities provided for students to learn, perform, and be recognized		X			X			
Teachers given more instructional autonomy					X			X
Staff collectively responsible for students' meeting academic and behavioral standards					X			
Teams of staff decide how to allocate available resources					X			X

SOURCE: 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTE: X indicates that 50 percent or more of teachers reported the critical feature was in "all" or "most" classes.

At all but one school, the majority of teachers judged that most classes presented students with high, fair, and clear academic standards; at all but two schools, most felt that high, fair, and clear conduct standards existed as well. No other critical feature was seen as having been put in place at the majority of schools.

Whether the teachers' perceptions are valid and whether they correspond with what students had to say about these matters are important issues that cannot be considered at any length here, although they will be explored in later reports.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the present focus is on what teachers believed to be true; as argued in Chapter 4, such perceptions might affect other reactions to and beliefs about First Things First.

Since First Things First places considerable emphasis on increased autonomy for teachers with respect to instruction and budgeting, it is particularly worth noting what teachers had to say in this regard. The survey results indicate that, as is true in many schools, teachers had considerable authority within their classrooms and relatively little outside it. The majority of teachers at all but one school reported having some or a lot of say in *what* they taught, and the vast majority at all schools (upwards of 85 percent) agreed that they had some or a lot of say in *how* they taught. On the other hand, over half the teachers at all the schools said that they had little or no involvement in their school's budgeting process — indicating that it would be a major departure from previous practice to give small learning communities (SLCs) control over financial resources.<sup>15</sup>

**The principal's leadership.** The school change literature consistently places a premium on the role of the principal in guiding change efforts. Principals are expected to pitch the reform to faculty members, to oversee the implementation of reform and make it a collective effort involving both teachers and administrators, and to maintain a consistent focus on raising student achievement.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Data from the spring 2001 student survey suggest a more complex picture. For example, teachers were largely convinced that high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards were in place. Across all sites, 70 percent of the students agreed with the statement "The rules in this school are very clear," and a similar percentage agreed with "My teachers are fair with me." On the other hand, a hefty minority of students (43 percent) agreed with "My teachers don't make clear what they expect of me in school," and a slim majority (52 percent) disagreed with "All adults in this school treat all students the same when it comes to following the rules."

<sup>15</sup>When asked who was primarily responsible for budgetary decision-making at their school, the majority of teachers at five schools (Shaw, Greenville, Weston, and Riverview Gardens High School, and Central Middle School) said that the district had this role. Reflecting their awareness of decentralized decision-making in the Houston Independent School District, the majority of teachers at Lee High School and Sharpstown Middle School agreed that the principal had primary responsibility for budgeting. (Teachers at East Middle School in Riverview Gardens gave mixed answers to this question.)

<sup>16</sup>See Bolman and Deal, 1997; Cushman, 1992; Olson, 2000; Podmostko, 2000.

In open-ended interviews, stakeholders were asked to characterize their principal's leadership qualities and relationships with staff members. The respondents gave a variety of answers, but most principals were described in positive terms.

To analyze in quantitative terms the staff survey data on the principal's leadership and other factors affecting reform that are discussed in the balance of this chapter, the researchers created school environment scales to summarize teachers' responses on several survey items hypothesized to measure a given construct. Although the scales are exploratory in nature, they nonetheless may prove a useful way of analyzing and comparing the schools that are implementing First Things First.

The items constituting each scale appear in Table 2.6 and consist of statements that respondents were asked to rate from 1 to 4 (where 1 = "not at all true," 2 = "not very true," 3 = "sort of true," and 4 = "very true"). Because an individual's scale score was simply the average of his or her responses to the various items, scale scores, too, could range from 1 to 4.

Tables 2.7 and 2.8 present the findings. Because the data are sensitive, the schools are not identified by name but are simply labeled A through H. The tables show the data in two different ways. First, Table 2.7 contains the mean response on each scale for the staff members at each school. An average score above the theoretical midpoint of 2.5 indicates that teachers at that school believed that the statement summarizing the scale was more true than untrue; a score under 2.5 indicates they thought that it was more untrue than true. Second, Table 2.8 shows the percentage of staff members at each school whose scale score was 3 or higher and the percentage whose scale score was 2 or lower. These two percentages could be interpreted as indicating the proportion of respondents at each school who thought that the statement summarizing the construct was "sort of true" or "very true" and the proportion who thought that it was "not very true" or "not at all true," respectively.

Two cautions about the analyses using these scales are in order. First, because the survey was administered in March and April 2001, well after the planning year was under way, the data do not provide an altogether accurate picture of what the schools were like before First Things First was introduced. It is possible that staff members' perceptions of their schools' leadership, and of each other, were to some degree affected by participation in the planning process itself.

Second, these scales have not yet been validated, although early analysis suggests that schools' ratings on the scales measuring the principal's responsiveness and staff assessments of parental involvement are largely consistent with reports from the developers and field researchers. (For the scale measuring the existence of a culture of continuous improvement, there is no qualitative information that would allow a judgment one way or the other; for the scale measuring collegiality, as noted below, scale ratings are flatly inconsistent with field reports, and both

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 2.6**

### Items Used to Create School Environment Scales

Scale	Items Scored Positively	Items Scored in Reverse
Principal's responsiveness <sup>a</sup>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Staff get support from building administrators to do what they need to do.</li> <li>2. My principal cares about each teacher personally.</li> <li>3. My principal has respect for teachers' commitment and competence.</li> <li>4. My principal respects teachers' opinions and is willing to listen when they have something to say.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. My principal doesn't really know what's going on in this school.</li> <li>6. My principal doesn't welcome teachers' input on school policies and practices.</li> <li>7. My principal is hard to get to talk to without going through a whole chain of command.</li> </ol>
Presence of a culture of continuous improvement <sup>b</sup>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Staff in this school encourage each other to do well.</li> <li>2. Staff in this school share resources with one another.</li> <li>3. My colleagues support my efforts to improve how I teach.</li> <li>4. Excellence in teaching is expected at this school.</li> <li>5. Teachers here share a common view of what constitutes good teaching.</li> <li>6. Teachers here are eager to learn and improve as teachers.</li> <li>7. Staff here get the support they need to improve instruction from each other.</li> <li>8. Staff here get the support they need to improve instruction from the principal.</li> <li>9. Staff here get the support they need to improve instruction from the Central Office.</li> <li>10. Staff here get the pressure they need to improve instruction from each other.</li> <li>11. Staff here get the pressure they need to improve instruction from the principal.</li> <li>12. Staff here get the pressure they need to improve instruction from the Central Office.</li> <li>13. Staff here get the flexibility they need to improve instruction from each other.</li> <li>14. Staff here get the flexibility they need to improve instruction from the principal.</li> <li>15. Staff here get the flexibility they need to improve instruction from the Central Office.</li> </ol>	
Relationships among staff members <sup>c</sup>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There is a feeling of collegiality, trust, and respect among staff members in this building.</li> <li>2. Staff in this school share resources with one another.</li> <li>3. Staff in this school go out of their way to help each other.</li> <li>4. When new staff members come aboard, existing staff pitch in and help them learn the ropes.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Staff in this building make excuses or blame one another, instead of cooperating to find solutions to problems.</li> <li>6. Teachers here are distrustful of one another.</li> <li>7. Staff in this building cluster in cliques that don't much like or trust one another.</li> </ol>

(continued)

**Table 2.6 (continued)**

Scale	Items Scored Positively	Items Scored in Reverse
Staff members' perceptions of parental involvement <sup>d</sup>	1. Parents do as much as they can to help the students in this school learn. 2. Parents get involved with their children's education at this school. 3. Parents here are involved in this school.	

SOURCE: 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTES: All items were rated on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 = not at all true, 2 = not very true, 3 = sort of true, and 4 = very true.

<sup>a</sup>The standardized alpha coefficient for the scale was .90.

<sup>b</sup>The standardized alpha coefficient for the scale was .86.

<sup>c</sup>The standardized alpha coefficient for the scale was .84.

<sup>d</sup>The standardized alpha coefficient for the scale was .85.

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 2.7**

### Average Scale Scores on Factors Hypothesized to Affect Implementation, by School

School	Scale Scores Representing Staff Members' Responses to the Statement			
	Principal Is Responsive to Teachers' Needs and Opinions	Culture of Continuous Improvement Is Present	Relationships Among Staff Members Are Collegial	Staff Members See Parents as Involved
A	3.41 (0.61)	2.77 (0.38)	2.69 (0.51)	2.02 (0.69)
B	2.75 (0.76)	2.57 (0.47)	2.64 (0.43)	1.98 (0.55)
C	3.21 (0.59)	2.46 (0.44)	2.78 (0.42)	2.25 (0.63)
D	2.65 (0.83)	2.63 (0.49)	2.80 (0.53)	1.83 (0.54)
E	2.95 (0.74)	2.80 (0.43)	2.80 (0.47)	1.86 (0.52)
F	3.04 (0.63)	2.65 (0.43)	2.77 (0.48)	1.66 (0.45)
G	2.73 (0.63)	2.61 (0.39)	2.61 (0.42)	1.60 (0.59)
H	2.83 (0.66)	2.71 (0.41)	2.83 (0.47)	1.95 (0.56)
All schools	2.89 *** (0.74)	2.65 *** (0.45)	2.77 (0.48)	1.88 *** (0.57)

SOURCE: 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTES: Scores can range between 1.0 and 4.0. Scores above the theoretical midpoint of 2.5 indicate that, on average, staff believed that the statement was more true than false. Scores below 2.5 indicate that, on average, staff believed that the statement was more false than true.

The numbers in parentheses indicate the standard deviation.

\*\*\* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .01 level.



## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 2.8**

### **Staff Members' Beliefs About Factors Hypothesized to Affect Implementation, by School**

School	Percentage of Staff Members Believing Statement to Be True or Untrue							
	Principal Is Responsive to Teachers' Needs and Opinions		Culture of Continuous Improvement Is Present		Relationships Among Staff Members Are Collegial		Staff Members See Parents as Involved	
	True	Untrue	True	Untrue	True	Untrue	True	Untrue
A	85.2	7.4	33.3	0.0	37.0	7.4	22.2	70.4
B	41.8	20.9	23.9	11.9	31.3	9.0	14.9	67.2
C	72.9	4.2	13.0	19.6	28.6	0.0	18.4	42.9
D	40.3	26.4	27.4	13.7	43.9	10.0	8.5	73.9
E	60.5	13.2	39.7	5.1	42.3	9.0	9.0	78.2
F	69.7	6.7	23.3	8.9	48.4	11.0	4.4	90.1
G	35.7	14.3	25.0	3.6	28.6	10.7	7.1	75.0
H	49.1	10.5	28.6	7.1	37.9	5.2	12.1	69.0
All schools	54.5	15.0 ***	27.1	9.9 *	39.6	8.3	10.6	72.9 ***

SOURCE: 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTES: \* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .10 level.

\*\*\* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Percentages do not sum up to 100.0 percent because many faculty members' responses fell between "true" and "untrue."

for that reason and because the scale does not indicate statistically significant differences among the schools, it is not used in further analyses.)<sup>17</sup>

A number of items on the staff survey examined teachers' opinions about their principals.<sup>18</sup> As Table 2.8 shows, a slim majority of staff members at all schools (55 percent) believed that the statement summarizing the construct — "My principal is responsive to teachers' needs and opinions" — was at least "sort of true." (The average score on this scale, as shown in Table 2.7, is 2.89, which yields a similar conclusion: that, across all schools, principals were more likely than not to be perceived as responsive to staff.) There was, however, significant variation among the responses of teachers at the different schools.

**The presence of a "culture of continuous improvement."** The school reform literature suggests that reform is made easier when teachers are already actively engaged in a dialogue about instruction and when the school culture is one that emphasizes growth and improvement.<sup>19</sup> In research interviews, stakeholders were asked about the extent to which they discussed instructional strategies with one another. The largest number of responses indicated that such exchanges largely took place with other members of their academic departments or in department meetings. A significant minority of stakeholders said that such conversations happened rarely or not at all.

As with the scales measuring aspects of the principal's leadership, a scale tapping the existence of a culture of continuous improvement was developed from items on the staff survey. The average scale score across the eight schools — 2.65 on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 denoting a high level of emphasis on continuous improvement — seems to suggest that to the extent that such a culture existed, it was not well developed (Table 2.7). Indeed, only about a quarter of all staff members appeared to endorse the idea that a culture of continuous improvement existed in their school (Table 2.8). While there were statistically significant differences across the schools in teachers' ratings of this aspect of school climate, the variation was relatively small.

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<sup>17</sup>Throughout this report, differences are described as "statistically significant" if they are unlikely to have arisen by chance. Three levels of statistical significance are identified: Differences are significant at the .10 level if the probability that they arose by chance is 1 in 10 or less, at the .05 level if the probability that they arose by chance is 1 in 20 or less, and at the .01 level if the probability that they arose by chance is 1 in 100 or less.

<sup>18</sup>Along with the scale of the principal's responsiveness, researchers also attempted to create scales tapping other dimensions of the principal's leadership: the principal as instructional leader, for example, and the principal as able to mediate on teachers' behalf with the outside world. Because the reliability coefficients for these scales are much lower — .65 and .63, respectively — the scales are not discussed in further detail.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Little, 1982.

**Relationships among faculty members.** Charles Payne has written eloquently about the difficulty of implementing schoolwide reform in schools marked by a “dysfunctional social climate,” where tense and suspicious interpersonal relationships among staff members, factionalism, and poor internal communication are the norm.<sup>20</sup> Payne suggests that high levels of tension among staff members in these schools lead teachers to avoid discussion of problems within the school, in order to avoid open conflict. Successful implementation of reform, in contrast, is highly associated with trust and confidence in one’s colleagues.<sup>21</sup>

A seven-item scale was used to tap the extent to which staff members in First Things First said that they got along with and respected each other. As Table 2.7 shows, the average score on the scale across all schools is 2.77 on a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 indicates a high level of collegiality, suggesting that while relationships among teachers were more characterized by trust and respect than not, there was much room for improvement. In fact, only about 40 percent of the staff members gave responses suggesting that they thought it was at least “sort of true” that collegial relationships existed among their colleagues.<sup>22</sup> There are no statistically significant differences in the ratings for the different schools, and this alone suggests cause for skepticism about the validity of the scale, given the variability in staff relationships reported by developers and field researchers. The ratings for particular schools, moreover, did not correspond with field observations. For these reasons, this scale was dropped from further analyses.

**Staff members’ perceptions of parental involvement.** When asked by interviewers to characterize staff members’ relationships with the parents of their students, one stakeholder replied, “Do they have relationships?” Another said, “Very nonexistent.” On the whole, those who were interviewed believed that parents were largely uninvolved with their children’s schooling. They typically cited as evidence the poor turnout for parent association meetings and opined that parents came to the school only when they had to (for example, when report cards were dispensed or when they needed to confer with an administrator about a disciplinary issue).

This perception of parental noninvolvement is important because studies indicate that many teachers attribute the poor academic performance of students (especially minority students) to their home environments; they believe that most failing students lack educational goals and values as a result of their upbringing.<sup>23</sup> When teachers hold students’ families accountable for the students’ achievement or failure, they are also likely to believe that they themselves have

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<sup>20</sup>Payne, 1998.

<sup>21</sup>It is worth noting that First Things First is intended to increase collegiality over time, as staff members build relationships of trust and mutual support in their small learning communities.

<sup>22</sup>This should not be interpreted to mean that a majority of respondents believed that relationships among staff members were *not* collegial. The majority of staff members had scale scores between “not very true” and “sort of true.”

<sup>23</sup>Lipman, 1997.

only limited influence over their students' academic performance<sup>24</sup> and to discount the need for changes in their own practice. One SIF gave memorable expression to this viewpoint when asked whether staff at her school believed that change was needed:

I don't know. They know that the scores had to improve. But a lot of teachers think it's the kids' and the parents' fault. They don't take any ownership. They say, "If they would raise Johnny, I could teach him."

If the teachers saw parents as being disengaged from their children's schools, and from their education more generally, a number of administrators saw the teachers' own behavior as contributing to poor relationships. Said one principal:

Some teachers won't want to hear what parents have to say, because as educators they are kind of "sedidy" [overly proper]. They look down on parents. Parents without a formal education background feel more uncomfortable coming in. We have to make a way to make them feel comfortable, not feel that they're inferior to us.

Another principal commented:

Parents feel threatened; they feel intimidated. . . . We really have a problem with that. These parents aren't college graduates; some aren't high school graduates. They feel intimidated by the way teachers talk and dress. Some teachers know how to deal with it — they don't try to make parents feel small, or show them how much education they have and how much you don't have. A lot of making the parents feel small goes on. We have to make our parents feel more comfortable when they come over here. We need a lot of work on that.

There is evidence that the "work" that the principal mentioned can pay off. On the scale measuring the extent to which parents were involved with their children's education, teachers were likely to agree that parents were not very involved — as Table 2.8 shows, almost three-quarters of staff members believed just that. However, the school where teachers were least likely to see parents as uninvolved was one where the principal had required teachers to make weekly telephone calls to parents — and to turn in a log of their calls — so that the teachers could get to know the parents better. This suggests that the Family Advocacy component of First Things First may help to bridge the communication gaps and cultural and other misunderstandings that sometimes separate teachers from the families of the students they teach.

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<sup>24</sup>Hall, Hines, Bacon, and Koulianos, 1992.

## Chapter 3

# The Planning Year of First Things First

### Introduction

As noted in Chapter 2, staff members of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) did not think that a formal vote on adopting First Things First would be important as an expression of buy-in. Rather, they believed that resistance to change would diminish and that buy-in and ownership would develop as, during the planning year, teachers and other members of the school community studied more about First Things First and made important decisions about how it would be implemented in their schools. This “year” began in the summer of 2000 for selected site personnel and in the fall of 2000 for all school staff members; it concluded with activities during the summer of 2001 to further prepare the buildings to open their doors as schools that would implement the initiative.

The theory of change underlying First Things First hypothesizes that a number of conditions must be met in order for reform to be implemented successfully. Staff members at schools implementing the reform must have a sense of its *urgency* — they must believe that change is needed, and needed now. They must possess *awareness and knowledge* of the reform that is to be put in place. They must feel *committed* to the changes that will be made and must believe that the changes are *possible* — they must feel that their efforts will yield results. Finally, they must feel *ready* to implement the change.

This chapter explores the planning-year activities and processes by which IRRE sought to build an initial sense of urgency, awareness, possibility, readiness, and commitment to First Things First on the part of the participating districts and schools. While similar in many respects to what had been done to build support for the initiative in Kansas City, Kansas, the process has evolved over time and continues to do so. One important difference between the Kansas City experience and that of the scaling-up sites is that, in Kansas City, the district’s central office had a year to prepare for First Things First before the first group of schools that would implement the initiative began their own planning year. In contrast, at the expansion sites, the exigencies of the demonstration required that district-level and school-level planning take place simultaneously. This difference in planning is explored in Chapter 4.

The next section of this chapter describes the roles of IRRE staff members and affiliates and of the key players involved in the change process at the central office and in the participating schools — the responsibilities they faced and the challenges they sometimes confronted. Then the chapter examines early activities at the schools, including the Fall Roundtable meetings to introduce the intervention to all staff members and the creation of work groups at each

school to involve all personnel in accomplishing key planning-year tasks. Separate sections then examine the steps taken to initiate the structural, instructional, and governance and accountability measures that are at the heart of First Things First at the school level. Finally, the chapter considers the ways in which personnel in the school district's central office supported these activities. Figure 3.1 shows a time line of the major events.<sup>1</sup>

The discussion suggests the following conclusions:

- Working through both central-office staff and consultants, IRRE, as program developer, devoted considerable time and staff resources to launching the initiative.
- The role of School Improvement Facilitator (SIF) was a difficult one, requiring a strong sense of organization and the ability both to empathize with and to separate from the concerns of staff members.
- Treading the line between being prescriptive and granting choice to the schools is difficult. In this case, trouble arose when, instead of saying what the basic structure of the schools would be, IRRE left this choice to the schools — but presented its recommendations so forcefully that staff felt dictated to anyway. In retrospect, all parties felt that a more prescriptive approach would have been better, and this is the approach that IRRE will adopt with new schools.
- There was widespread agreement that staff really began to come together when they received assignments to their small learning communities (SLCs) and began exercising their creativity in recruiting students.
- District officials reported that the planning year of First Things First did not require major shifts in policy or practice.
- The agenda of activities for the planning year is a work in progress, and, as First Things First moves on to new schools, many modifications are under way to make the year more effective; these include introducing study groups, modifying the work group structure, and assigning staff earlier to their SLCs.

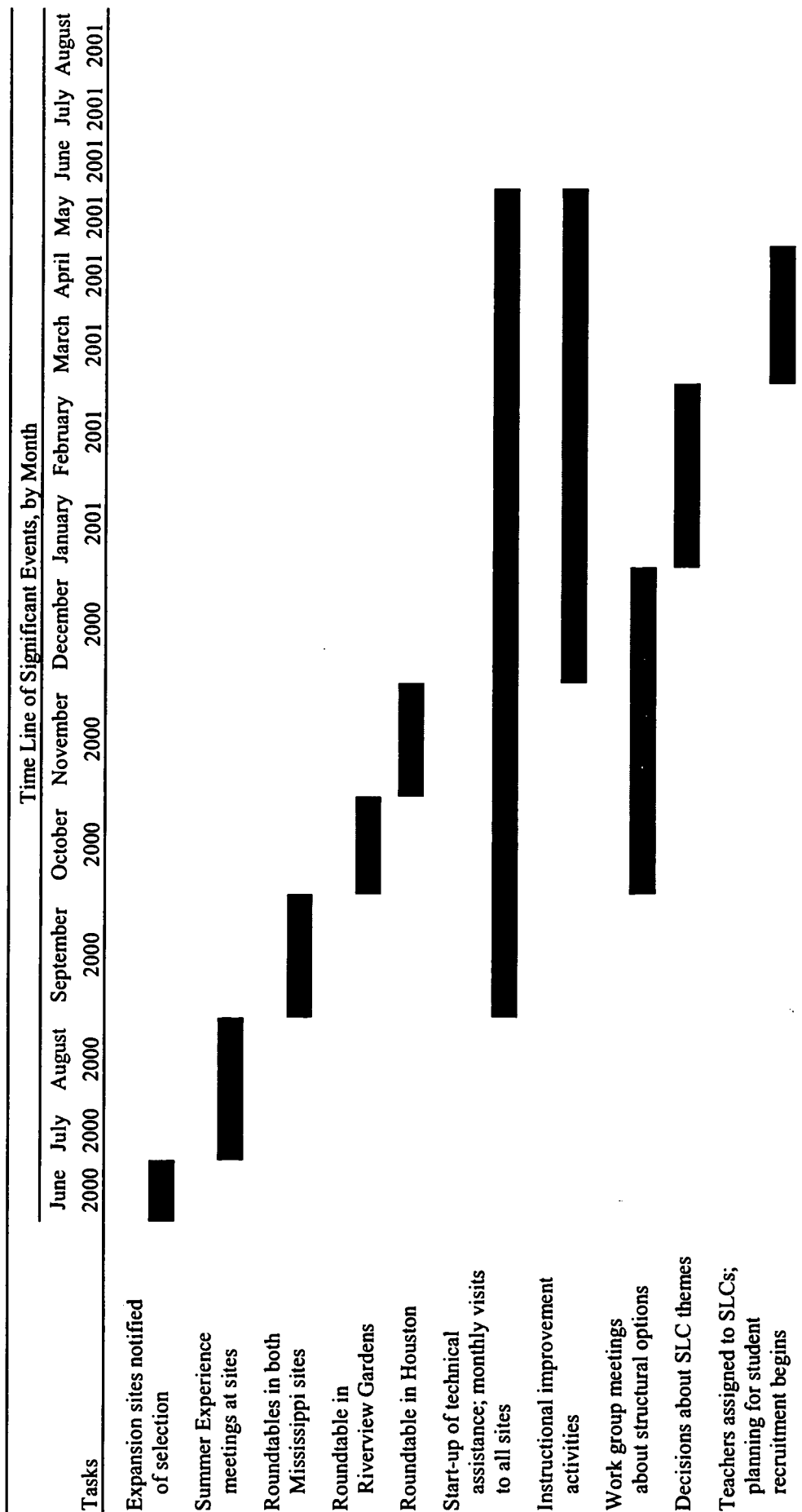
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<sup>1</sup>The time line excludes periodic meetings that IRRE held for district officials, principals, School Improvement Facilitators (SIFS), and others.

## Scaling Up First Things First

Figure 3.1

## Major Activities of the Initiative's Planning Year, 2000-2001



(continued)

**Figure 3.1 (continued)**

Tasks	Time Line of Significant Events, by Month														
	June 2000	July 2000	August 2000	September 2000	October 2000	November 2000	December 2000	January 2001	February 2001	March 2001	April 2001	May 2001	June 2001	July 2001	August 2001
Technical assistance in scheduling provided															
Students enrolled in SLCs															
SLC coordinator training															
Two-day training for all staff prior to school start-up															

SOURCE: IRRE materials.



## Key Players in the School Change Process

### IRRE and Its Associates

IRRE, as the external change agent, provided both pressure and support to the demonstration sites throughout the planning year. As with the site selection process described in Chapter 2, IRRE relied both on its own staff and on consultants to provide ongoing assistance and oversight to the schools and otherwise to augment the efforts of its core staff.

**Core staff.** Some of the work of IRRE core staff members was invisible to the participating districts and schools: continuing the search for the district site, preparing materials — including a detailed guide to planning-year activities and procedures — and managing the work of the consultants. But Jim Connell and other core staff members also led the Fall Roundtable meetings at the sites and were present at many other important site events. They conducted training meetings for the SIFs and for the counselors as well as a leadership development meeting for principals and district officials. And they remained constantly available via phone and e-mail to personnel at both the central office and the schools to troubleshoot and offer advice or a sympathetic ear, as needed.

**Site coordinators.** To provide continuing operational guidance to the sites, IRRE appointed two consultants — both of them former school administrators — to serve as “site coordinators.” One worked with the two Mississippi sites, and the other worked with Houston and Riverview Gardens.

The site coordinators generally spent two or three days per month at each site (only one day per month at Shaw, because of its small size). During visits, they held numerous meetings with key people in the schools and the district office. Thus, a typical visit might include meetings with the principals and SIFs (whose role is described below) to review the planning work of the previous month and clarify upcoming tasks and planned support; an appointment with the superintendent or other key central-office personnel to keep district leadership abreast of progress and issues; and attendance at work group meetings to observe the action or offer advice. The site coordinators were often present for major on-site training events. Sometimes, too, they attended school board sessions, parent meetings, or other community events in order to answer questions about First Things First and gain greater familiarity with local actors and issues. Between site visits, the coordinators maintained phone and e-mail contact with site personnel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The fact that, like the site coordinators, IRRE central-office personnel were also in direct contact with site personnel and also visited the sites sometimes made for uncertainty about who was doing what.  
(continued)

The site coordinator's position involved a mix of encouragement, coaching, and prodding. Sometimes the coordinators assisted site personnel with basic management tasks, such as establishing a plan of action with deadlines against which progress could be monitored. Sometimes they had to press staff to name and identify the problems they faced and to think about potential solutions. Sometimes they had to nudge key decision-makers to take necessary actions. Sometimes, site coordinators served as cheerleaders, boosting morale by reminding participants of all they had done and accomplished. And sometimes, as noted below, they acted as lightning rods for school staff members' concerns about change and the change process.

**Other consultants.** IRRE drew on other consultants who had expertise in specific areas. One provided assistance to all the schools in developing implementation-year schedules for teachers and students. Other consultants trained site personnel in the use of instructional improvement techniques and approaches, as discussed below. And key personnel from the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools made presentations at the Roundtables and were otherwise available to share their experiences in implementing First Things First with staff at the scaling-up sites.

### **Central-Office Personnel**

**The superintendent.** In all school districts except Houston, the superintendent of schools was intimately involved in planning for reform; in Houston, the West District superintendent largely occupied the role played elsewhere by the head of the entire school district.<sup>3</sup>

Superintendents played a critical role in promoting and supervising school-level change. They were also responsible for keeping school board members and central-office staff apprised about important developments. Finally, in most sites, superintendents were instrumental in introducing First Things First to the wider community through public appearances and, in several instances, stories in the print and broadcast media.

**The "point person."** Each district participating in the demonstration was asked to designate a central-office administrator as point person for the effort as a whole.<sup>4</sup> The point person

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This did not appear to work to the detriment of the sites, however — they simply had a wider range of resources on which to draw.

<sup>3</sup>The size and decentralized nature of the Houston school district precluded the superintendent's direct involvement — as did the fact that, midway through the school year, he was appointed Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education. Nonetheless, he made an appearance at the "Summer Experience" meeting and at the Fall Roundtable for the two Houston schools, where he gave his support to the initiative. His chief of staff was also very involved in planning for First Things First, until she left to join the superintendent in Washington.

<sup>4</sup>The exception was in Shaw, MS, where, because of the small size of the district, the high school librarian rather than a central-office staff member was designated as point person. In Houston, the West District superintendent filled this role.

was responsible for coordinating financial and staff support for the initiative on the part of central-office personnel, as well as for acting as liaison with IRRE. As the planning year unfolded, there was considerable variation among the sites in the degree to which the point persons were engaged in providing oversight and assistance to the participating schools.

### **School-Level Personnel**

**The principal.** While the principal was not charged with day-to-day planning for First Things First (that role was reserved for the SIFs, as discussed below), he or she was to play an essential part in communicating personal enthusiasm for and commitment to the reform and in pushing it forward. By design, the principal was also ultimately responsible for making decisions about space utilization, the staffing of the SLCs, and other elements of how the school would function once First Things First was in place.

As the planning year progressed, different models of principals' behavior and leadership were evident in the different schools. Some principals readily empowered the SIFs and the faculty as well; others had difficulty doing so. Some principals took an active role in monitoring the accomplishment of the tasks associated with First Things First (or performed these tasks themselves when the SIFs had other responsibilities); others were more disengaged. Some principals made decisions in a timely fashion; others delayed. Finally, as suggested in Chapter 4, some principals had strong credibility among their faculty and thus could exert a positive influence on staff attitudes toward the reform; other principals were not viewed with a similar degree of trust.

**The School Improvement Facilitator (SIF).** One of the most important ways that participating districts were required to support First Things First was by appointing and paying the salaries of individuals known as School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs), who were responsible for managing the change process at schools participating in the demonstration. The SIF's position was full time at the high schools but only half time at the three middle schools. At all schools, SIFs had other responsibilities that sometimes detracted from their ability to focus on reform. Officially reporting not to the principal but to the initiative's point person, or liaison, in the district office, in practice the SIF was accountable to the point person, the principal, and the IRRE site coordinator as well.

Based in part on its experience in Kansas City, IRRE had recommended that districts not choose as SIFs faculty members at the participating schools, reasoning that it would be hard for these individuals to carry the necessary authority with their former colleagues and principals. IRRE suggested instead that districts look for people with some prior administrative experience. The sites, however, felt that finding candidates outside the schools would be difficult, and in five of the eight cases, those selected for the position were longtime teachers at the participating

schools.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, the SIFS were individuals whom the principals had proposed for the position, because of their interpersonal and organizational skills and, not coincidentally, their rapport with the principals themselves. In other cases, candidates applied for the position and were interviewed by a panel of administrators and stakeholders. All the SIFS had previous experience leading staff development or other adult education efforts, although the extent of this experience varied considerably. IRRE provided the SIFs with two days of role-specific training shortly after the planning year began.

Some of the job-related responsibilities that SIFs described in interviews were straightforward: organizing various work group and other meetings, providing agendas and preparing other materials for the meetings, modeling group facilitation skills and coaching other staff members in such skills, attending the meetings where possible, working with the district office to get needed resources, and generally making sure that planning moved forward. Fulfilling these responsibilities, however, was often not easy: Some SIFs had limited experience in developing and carrying out work plans and in peer coaching, and site coordinators were sometimes called on to provide assistance in these areas.

Furthermore, any task list does not begin to describe the psychological and interpersonal aspects of the job. It was the SIFs who were viewed as publicly embodying the new reform. It was the SIFs who heard out teachers' grievances — and sometimes their grief — while trying to press on them the need for and inevitability of change. And it was the SIFs who fielded staff members' questions and attempted to assuage their anxieties. Sometimes they reported telling their questioners that they did not know all the answers and that some aspects of the intervention would have to be worked out jointly over time.

Asked about the main responsibilities of her position, one SIF replied:

Organization, motivation, communication. Trying to keep a vision out there, a direction. It's been very important to keep the staff aware of where we're going, even if only for a few weeks ahead.

Another SIF described the role succinctly:

To listen. To be incredibly attuned, to find out where concerns are and turn concerns into solutions.

Spearheading changes that they believed in and that they were convinced would be good for students was one aspect of their job that many SIFs found particularly rewarding. Another was their increased contact with other staff members. One SIF commented: "Staff know

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<sup>5</sup>In one of the remaining three instances, the SIF was an instructional supervisor; in a second, a teacher at another school in the district; and in the third, the district's Director of Federal Programs.

my door is open to them. I've made myself accessible. I want them to share their concerns with me. . . . I've known some of these staff for years, but not as well as I do now."

If being a SIF required an ability to empathize with others teachers, the role also demanded an ability to separate from them. One SIF with considerable experience as a supervisor and trainer of teachers noted that the fact that she had not just moved out of the classroom enabled her better to avoid getting caught up in the teachers' emotions. She added that although she had great relationships with many teachers, there was nonetheless distrust of her — a reaction she appeared to take seriously but not personally, noting, "When you bring someone in to change your building, they're not going to trust you." Interviews suggest that, for other SIFs, the separation was more painful; one noted that her former colleagues, seeing her as part of the administration now, chose their words carefully when they were around her.

To function effectively, SIFs also needed the respect and support of their principals. Although SIFs did not report directly to the principals, they kept the latter apprised about all developments, sometimes through formal meetings but more often through informal ones and catch-up conversations in the hallway or parking lot. In all but one instance, relationships between principals and SIFs were characterized by a reasonable degree of mutual trust and support. In this exceptional case, the SIF had no significant administrative experience and found it difficult to fill the new role demands; the principal, for his part, did little to provide "on-the-job training," instead delegating much of the SIF's work to another administrator. The SIF was let go at the end of the planning year, and a replacement was hired.

Although SIFs generally reported receiving good support from IRRE, a number noted that, especially early in the planning year, they received materials for meetings too late to be able to review them thoroughly and prepare adequately. This situation improved over time, especially when the SIFs received a guide to the planning year that provided more detail about upcoming activities.

**The stakeholders.** To create support within the schools, IRRE followed a strategy of building outward from a core of interested and knowledgeable individuals. The "Summer Experience" meeting that was held during the summer before the planning year served to expose a small group of "stakeholders" to the initiative.<sup>6</sup> These stakeholders — a group composed mainly of school staff members (teachers, counselors, and support staff) but also including students, parents, and other community members — were then responsible for running discussion groups at the upcoming full-faculty Roundtables and for chairing meetings of the work groups formed after the Roundtables. More generally, they were expected to display openness toward and en-

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<sup>6</sup>IRRE subsequently decided to change this term, since it incorrectly implies that these individuals have more of a stake than others do in the implementation of First Things First.

courage dialogue about the intervention among their fellows. As the demonstration manager put it: "It wasn't their job to be cheerleaders, but to facilitate conversation. You hope they'll be cheerleaders, by virtue of a little additional exposure and leadership, but that wasn't the original issue."

The schools selected their stakeholders in different ways. At some schools, the principal asked certain individuals to fill the position. (At Shaw, where a new principal was in the process of being hired, the district superintendent did this.) At other schools, individuals were nominated by their peers or themselves volunteered to be stakeholders (although one principal acknowledged that he had urged certain faculty members to volunteer) and were then chosen either by a faculty vote or by having their names drawn out of a hat. Most principals said that they tried to select people who didn't necessarily hold leadership roles but whom other faculty members trusted and respected and who the principals thought would be both fair-minded and good listeners and communicators.

For most, being a stakeholder did not represent a major commitment of time. A number of interview respondents said that no additional time was required of them; others said that the role took up one or two hours a week (largely for getting materials ready and otherwise preparing for meetings). And many reported that the role held many rewards: being "in on the ground floor of change," getting to know other faculty members better, seeing their work groups jell and be productive, and being perceived as leaders by colleagues or higher-ups. For some stakeholders, the role brought feelings of personal growth and enhanced self-respect.

Being a stakeholder also posed challenges. For one thing, some stakeholders said that the brief training in group facilitation skills that they had received at the Summer Experience meeting was insufficient for dealing with difficult or negative work group members or charged group dynamics.<sup>7</sup> For another, although IRRE guidelines made it very clear that the stakeholders were not expected to be repositories of knowledge about First Things First, a number of interview respondents reported that they had too little information about the initiative and were discomfited by their inability to answer their colleagues' questions. Finally, a number of stakeholders, like their colleagues, were upset by what they saw as IRRE's reneging on its promise of empowering teachers (see Section IV); dealing with their colleagues' frustration and sense of distrust was a special challenge for stakeholders who felt the same way.

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<sup>7</sup>A few interview respondents, looking back on the experience, suggested that stakeholders should work in pairs. As one noted, "to head a group by yourself of 15 to 20 people, some hostile, is asking a lot of people with little facilitation training." IRRE has adopted this practice for the planning year at the new Houston schools. Additionally, it is worth noting that several stakeholders at Lee High School also took part in a leadership training course provided by an outside organization. They reported that this experience had considerably enhanced their leadership skills.



## **Early Planning-Year Activities at the Sites**

### **The Summer Experience Meetings**

As previously noted, a principal purpose of the Summer Experience meetings was to prepare for the Fall Roundtables, and for the planning year more generally, by acquainting a small group of stakeholders with the initiative so that they would be in a position to facilitate staff discussions and guide subsequent work group activities. During the meetings, which lasted a day and a half, the new stakeholders and others in attendance heard a presentation about First Things First, got an overview of the planning-year activities, and then learned basic group facilitation skills: how to conduct a meeting, how to elicit the opinions of all participants, how to work toward consensus.

IRRE also used the occasion to meet with key central-office administrators and to explain to them how they could assist school staff in moving forward with planning.

### **The Fall Roundtables**

As one district official put it:

A few weeks later [after attending the Kansas City Roundtable in May 2000], we got this call that we had been accepted. We still didn't know what we had been accepted to. For me, it really began to sink in at the Roundtable in September.

The aim of the two-day meeting was to bring all staff members at a school together to learn about First Things First and in so doing to create a sense of the urgency of change and an incipient awareness of the initiative. In addresses to the assembled faculty members, the superintendent of schools, the principal, and, typically, a school board member also assured listeners that they were fully committed to the initiative's changes.

The Fall Roundtable followed a similar format at all sites and replicated some of the activities of the site selection Roundtable held several months earlier. After opening remarks, Jim Connell (or, in two instances, a high-level administrator from the Kansas City, Kansas, Public Schools) made a presentation intended to increase teachers' belief that change was an absolute necessity. Using the initiative's theory of change as a framework, the presentation began with an overview of the seven critical features of First Things First and the rationale for each. This was followed by statistics indicating that large numbers of students in the schools were at high risk of dropping out and pointing out the dire outcomes associated with dropout status for minority males — including high rates of involvement with the criminal justice system. Researchers observing the Roundtables noted that teachers' reactions to the data ranged from grave con-

cern, to denial by some that the data applied to their own students, to relative impassivity (especially at schools with a long and well-known history of poor performance).<sup>8</sup>

As had been the case at the site selection Roundtable, among the most well-received sessions at the Fall Roundtable, according to the observers, was a presentation by students from Wyandotte High School and Central Middle School in Kansas City, Kansas, and from Central Park East Secondary School in New York City. Staff members were attentive as the students described how conditions in their school had improved with the implementation of First Things First, and they were especially impressed by students' reports of the close relationships that they had formed with teachers. The teachers were heard to make complimentary comments about the young people's confidence, articulateness, intelligence, and honesty. And because what the students had to say was often funny, the presentation lightened the atmosphere with laughter and helped to dispel the somberness and discomfort that the student performance data had generated.<sup>9</sup>

Subsequent sessions also were intended to build knowledge about First Things First, to instill the belief that change could be implemented, and to secure early commitment to the initiative. Following the panel of students, staff members heard a panel of teachers from the two schools. The message that the Kansas City teachers imparted was that change was difficult but worthwhile; its subtext was that change was also *possible*, since it had been achieved in what had reputedly been Kansas City's worst high school. The second day of the Roundtable offered more opportunities for learning and reflection. Teachers were asked to read as "homework" an IRRE document describing the intervention, and this served as the springboard for further discussion. In Houston and Riverview Gardens, the second day also included a presentation on structural options that schools could adopt (see Section IV); and at all sites, teachers discussed good practices for groups to follow, in preparation for the upcoming work group meetings.

All in all, observers judged that the Fall Roundtables left teachers more cognizant of the need for change and made them at least willing to try something new. At the same time, in discussion sessions and in more informal settings, they heard teachers voice a number of concerns: how the critical features would be put in place (and especially whether lower student-adult ratios could be achieved without raising costs), whether the school district would really give promised autonomy to small learning communities, whether parents would be supportive, and how teachers' workloads would be affected. Paradoxically, too, while teachers' lack of information on some points was evident, a number of teachers commented that they had been given more information than they could absorb all at once.

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<sup>8</sup>At one high school, some faculty members attending the Roundtable refused to attribute the high dropout rates that were cited to poor instructional styles. Rather, they argued, many students' parents did migrant work and moved from place to place or were immigrants and returned to their countries of origin.

<sup>9</sup>The author is indebted to Belita Leal for this insight.



In Greenville, the Roundtable provoked concern and upset for another reason: the superintendent's announcement at that forum that the two high schools would be merged.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the rest of the Roundtable — and, indeed, through much of the planning year to follow — the issues raised in Greenville had less to do with First Things First per se than with the merger. The announcement led to an outcry on the part of some parents and students at T. L. Weston High School; it was widely agreed that this was fomented in part by some school faculty members, especially athletic coaches and advisors of extracurricular activities, who stood to lose their positions as a result of the merger. The conflict gradually diminished over the course of the planning year — although it did not dissipate altogether — as the superintendent and others explained the rationale for the merger to parents, students, civic groups, and other interested parties. (Indeed, a T. L. Weston parent who had been one of the merger's most vocal critics was one of the first to enroll her child in a science-oriented small learning community on the Greenville High School campus.)

### **The Establishment of Work Groups**

At the Roundtable, staff members indicated their interest in joining various work groups to undertake specific planning-year tasks and activities. On the basis of these responses, the SIF and principal assigned all staff members to one of several work groups: Staffing; Family and Community; Facilities, Administrative Support, and Time Use (FAST); Teaching and Learning; and Finance.

The program developers viewed participation in work groups not only as a way to get tasks accomplished but also as a vehicle for building knowledge of and commitment to First Things First. The vast majority of teachers and other classroom personnel who responded to the spring survey (95 percent) reported that they had been involved in the planning process, although researchers sitting in on the meetings noted that attendance was sometimes erratic and that those who attended did not always participate.<sup>11</sup>

The work groups varied in a number of respects. Because the frequency with which they met depended on the tasks for which they were responsible, some work groups met only a few times, while others met once a week for several months — a disparity that some teachers complained was unfair. Some work groups were responsible for coming up with concrete pro-

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<sup>10</sup>While the superintendent's intention had been to delay this announcement, the local news media broke the story the previous evening, making it incumbent on him to address the matter before the assembled faculty of the two schools.

<sup>11</sup>In Greenville, work group meetings took place during early-release time, and because of a serious no-show problem at the beginning, teachers were docked half a day's pay if they failed to attend these meetings. This policy resulted in greater attendance, although not necessarily participation. While custodial and cafeteria staff were invited to join the work group meetings, they tended not to participate.

posals, while the work of others was primarily administrative or simply involved learning more about First Things First.

Finally, in most cases, teachers decided when their work groups would meet, and the times at which meetings were scheduled also varied from school to school. In one case, work group meetings were held outside regular school hours and teachers were paid for attending; in another school, meetings took place during lunch hour or at other times during the school day; and in still other cases, weekly work group meetings took place during early-release time normally allocated to staff development.

The researchers generally characterized the tone of the work group meetings that they observed as being mutually respectful, with participants appearing free to speak their minds, although stakeholder interviews indicate that not all work groups came together easily.<sup>12</sup> The stakeholders did report that the work group meetings gave faculty members from different departments — and, in Greenville, from different campuses — a chance to work together and get to know each other better.

## Initiating Restructuring Changes

The division of large, and largely impersonal, schools into small learning communities (SLCs) in which students and teachers remain together for several years is the centerpiece of the intervention's school restructuring efforts. In the theory of change undergirding First Things First, SLCs are fundamental to the development of mutually caring, accountable relationships between students and staff members as well as to an increase in student engagement that is the precursor to increased academic achievement. It is also within the SLCs that staff members, in their role as family advocates, forge bonds with students' parents or guardians.

Creating SLCs in the schools was, perhaps, the single most important process of the planning year and entailed a number of decisions: whether or not the SLCs should be thematic in nature and how many years they should cover ("school structure decisions," as these were termed), what the themes should be, and how the SLCs should be staffed. Once the SLCs were established, they began to evolve as new entities.

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<sup>12</sup>In one instance, after a work group's discussions during the Roundtable meetings revealed intense dissent within the group, the stakeholder who was charged with convening it chose not to have the group meet again but to vote on key decisions by ballot instead.

Loud dissenters could also polarize meetings. In one extreme case, a principal barred an especially vociferous and negative staff member from all work group meetings; his outcast status prevented the staff member from further disrupting the implementation process.

**Reaching the decision about school structure.** IRRE had strong recommendations about how SLCs and continuity of care across the school years should be put in place. Taking a lesson from the experience of career academies (schools-within-schools organized around a broad group of related occupations) and similar initiatives, it favored a thematic approach. (In such an approach, course curricula are organized around such overarching concepts as “Science and Technology,” “Law and Justice,” “Health and Wellness,” and “The Performing Arts”; the electives that students take are related to these themes as well.) The Kansas City, Kansas, experience with First Things First also indicated the merits of four-year SLCs for high schools, rather than briefer ones.

At the outset, however, IRRE did not require that expansion-site schools put thematic, four-year SLCs into place. In the two Mississippi sites, IRRE quickly came to an agreement with central-office and school administrators about how the SLCs should be organized. Greenville administrators accepted IRRE’s recommendation, and, at the Fall Roundtable, teachers heard that their SLCs would be thematic and that students and teachers would remain together for four years. In Shaw, the small size of the high school precluded this design; instead, Shaw officials believed that the high school should be divided into a lower school (covering grades 8 and 9) and an upper school (grades 10 through 12), and this was the structure that Shaw teachers learned about at their Roundtable.<sup>13</sup>

In Houston and Riverview Gardens, administrators and IRRE agreed that, rather than mandate thematic, four-year SLCs, school faculties should make these structural decisions on their own. This was the same course of action that IRRE had followed in Kansas City, Kansas; as the demonstration manager explained, “While we had preferences, we didn’t feel we could impose them.” Instead, at the five schools in these two sites, the first task all the work groups faced was to decide on the nature and structure of their small learning communities (called “small learning academies” at Riverview Gardens High School).<sup>14</sup>

At the Fall Roundtables at these sites, Jim Connell was very explicit about IRRE’s recommendations but told the assembled faculty members that deciding for themselves would be their work groups’ first order of business. Connell did not see — and therefore did not mention — any drawbacks associated with thematic, four-year academies compared with the alternative approaches, and the one-sided nature of his presentation upset some people. Faculty members were also annoyed that IRRE had prepared for the work groups only materials that buttressed its

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<sup>13</sup>Shortly before the implementation year began, Shaw administrators opted to move 10th grade to the lower school. While this decision made sense on educational grounds, it left the school scrambling to rearrange student schedules after classes had started.

<sup>14</sup>The school’s SIF opined that the use of the term “academy” had had a positive impact on parents and other community members. “There’s something about the term that sounds more professional and has more of a career orientation sound,” she commented.

recommendations. And the instructions that IRRE had prepared for the stakeholders about how to run the work group meetings appeared to be designed to achieve the results that IRRE was aiming for, rather than to promote discussion of alternatives.<sup>15</sup>

IRRE took the position that it was its job to make recommendations and strong arguments for the teachers; those who took issue had to make their own case for their position. As the demonstration manager explained, "Our job was not to make arguments for the other side if we didn't believe those options were the best." Rather, IRRE suggested that staff with dissenting views search out evidence in support of nonthematic and two-year communities.

Discussions were heated in some work groups as some staff members expressed their opinions and feelings, and consensus proved elusive. At one school, staff members excluded the site coordinator from a work group meeting, fearing that otherwise they would not feel free to make their own decisions. At all three middle schools, the faculty consensus ran counter to IRRE's recommendation. Teachers supported SLCs that would be thematic, but they wanted the SLCs to include only a single grade; in such an arrangement, teachers would remain with the students through all three years of middle school and then "loop back" to pick up a new cohort of entering students. IRRE, in contrast, had recommended that SLCs include students in all three grades, to avoid undue disruption should a particular entering class prove unusually large or small. At two of the three schools, the teachers eventually saw the logic of IRRE's position. At a third, the principal, who had been persuaded that IRRE's plan was preferable, convened the staff and, asking staff members to trust her, announced that she was reversing their decision in the interest of what was good for the students. Although the principal made it clear that it was her decision, not IRRE's, to reverse the staff's vote, staff members continued to resent IRRE rather than the principal.

Ironically, IRRE was prepared to work with schools that did not follow its recommendations; indeed, three of the four high schools in Kansas City, Kansas, did not initially establish thematic, multiyear SLCs. But this message was not communicated clearly, and many teachers' sense of trust in IRRE was compromised. In interviews conducted weeks and sometimes months after the structural decisions had been made, many teachers reported feeling manipulated and used. They noted that they had been promised power and autonomy but were, in fact, empowered only to ratify IRRE's choices. Stakeholders worried that the process had diminished group members' receptivity to First Things First. The following quotes from stakeholder inter-

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<sup>15</sup>Thus, the instructions had stakeholders lead their groups in reviewing a handout listing the arguments in favor of thematic SLCs, reading a summary of the research supporting such SLCs, and looking at descriptions of thematic SLCs in two high schools. Finally, the stakeholders were to have their group vote on the question "Do you agree with FTF's recommendation that our students become members of thematic communities?" Those who disagreed were to be asked what additional information they needed in order to come to such an agreement.

views — most conducted several weeks after the structural decisions had been formally announced — are illustrative:

They [IRRE staff] keep telling us that they're being up-front with us, but I don't think so, it doesn't come across that way. I think decisions have been made without us.

They [IRRE] put the stakeholders in a very difficult position. They told us that we could make decisions, and we told our groups that, and then it ended up that that wasn't the case. So it looked like we knew that all along and lied to them.

My group wonders why we wasted so much time meeting and making decisions when those decisions were not accepted. Finally one staff member started saying, "Am I getting paid next year? If so, I'm okay with it." They're resigned . . . we aren't really being empowered, at least not so far. They're losing commitment to it.

A further problem was that so much time was spent in wrestling with the structural decisions that the planning schedule was thrown off course.

In retrospect, IRRE staff members acknowledged that they had made a mistake in giving school staff members a choice about an area where they really did not want them to have a choice. Indeed, given the distrust of IRRE that continued to be voiced months after the decisions had been reached, this may have been the single biggest mistake of the planning year. IRRE has learned from the experience, however, and the process will not be repeated. From the outset, the high schools and middle schools joining the demonstration as part of the second-stage expansion in Houston have understood that they will operate thematic, multigrade SLCs in which teachers remain with their students for all three years of middle school or all four years of high school.

**Deciding on themes and staffing the SLCs.** Fortunately, the remaining restructuring activities and processes generated much less conflict. Once the structural decisions had been reached, members of the Staffing Work Group helped to field a teacher questionnaire that guided the SLC assignment process. The questionnaire ascertained teachers' preferences for potential SLC themes and also included questions about certifications, areas of teaching experience, outside interests, gender, and ethnicity, in order to ensure that the SLCs would be balanced in these respects. Teachers were also asked to name other staff members whom they would like to have in their SLC — as well as one staff member with whom they did not want to work. On the basis of these answers, an IRRE consultant prepared a list of recommended themes. Students were then surveyed to determine the themes that had the widest appeal, and

once the themes had been selected, the staffing consultant made tentative assignments of teachers to the SLCs. The principals of the schools reviewed these staffing patterns, adjusting them as they deemed necessary (for example, to make sure that stronger teachers would be equitably distributed), and then posted the plans. Teachers who were dissatisfied with their assignments could appeal the decision to the principal.

In most sites, the process used for staffing the SLCs went smoothly. Principals reported making few changes in the plans they had received from the consultant (although they did not always act promptly on the plans). Most teachers appeared to accept their SLC assignments with reasonable equanimity, and there were few appeals. In Greenville, a few teachers were unhappy about having to move from one campus to another, but there, too, fewer teachers than expected appealed their assignments to the principals of the two campuses.

While the Staffing Work Group was the first to go into action, its functions were largely administrative and limited to reproducing, distributing, and collecting the staff surveys.<sup>16</sup> Work group members were not directly involved in decision-making, and because they were not privy to the confidential responses on the teacher questionnaires, they were also not in a position to answer in detail their colleagues' questions about the decisions that had been made. For these reasons, IRRE reasoned that the work of the Staffing Work Group could well be accomplished through other means as the demonstration moved forward.

**Deciding where SLCs and teachers should be located.** The framework of First Things First called for each SLC's sense of identity to be heightened not only by having a unique theme but also by occupying a discrete set of classrooms on the school premises.<sup>17</sup> Once each school had decided what its SLCs' themes would be, members of the Facilities, Administrative Support, and Time Use (FAST) Work Group had the responsibility of developing a draft plan for where the various SLCs should go. Beginning with detailed maps of the physical plant, they color-coded the areas where they thought the SLCs could be situated; the principals then reviewed their decisions. In general, the decisions facing FAST Work Group members were straightforward: For instance, a technology-oriented SLC had to be located near the computer lab. In most cases, only minor adjustments to the work groups' plans were necessary.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>In a few instances, the Staffing Work Group took on other responsibilities. At one school, for example, the group surveyed the faculty about whether or not to replace an assistant principal who would be vacating his position at the end of the planning year and participated in the process of interviewing and selecting his replacement.

<sup>17</sup>Some spaces (for example, science labs, the gym) served multiple SLCs.

<sup>18</sup>Interestingly, in Greenville, three task forces from Greenville and T. L. Weston High Schools were charged with making recommendations for the location of the SLCs across the two campuses. The three groups came up with strikingly similar plans.



**Setting up a base schedule.** While members of the FAST Work Group were initially charged with consulting with IRRE staff to develop a base schedule for their schools, the complexities involved were quickly recognized. In most of the schools, the creation of a base schedule was left to school administrators and counselors, working with the IRRE scheduling consultant.

**The SLCs and their work.** Once teachers received their SLC assignments, their focus shifted away from the work groups to SLC-specific activities. At some schools, the teachers had to select an SLC coordinator, who received a stipend in compensation for the extra time involved. (At other schools, the principals appointed the coordinators.) They had to allocate classrooms to individual teachers within the block of rooms in which the SLC as a whole was lodged.<sup>19</sup> They had to decide which elective classes their SLC should offer that would be consistent with the theme of their community and with state curriculum guidelines, and for which staff had the necessary expertise. They began to develop SLC-specific policies with regard to student discipline.

A major undertaking was to recruit students for the SLCs. At some schools, this was a galvanizing process: Teachers worked together with energy and enthusiasm to design eye-catching posters, brochures, and other recruitment materials. At one school, for example, teachers created a rectangular handout with large dollar signs in all four corners to advertise the advantages of joining their business-oriented SLC. At another school, the cover of the brochure for the Academy of Law depicted the blindfolded figure of Justice holding a scale, under which appeared the text: "Are you friendly, open, outgoing, understanding, and cooperative? Is it important that you do something to make the world a better place to live? This may be the academy for you." A photograph of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., appeared on the back. And the brochure for the school's Performing Arts academy simply showed a large five-pointed star with the words "music," "dance," and "theatre" around its edges. Recruitment fairs proved engaging and fun for teachers and students alike. In recruiting students, staff took care to emphasize, however, that students should choose the SLC that best represented their own interests, rather than the SLC that had the best "advertising pitch," or the one for which their friends were signing up.

In general, observers judged that once staff members started to plan concrete tasks together, their attitude toward First Things First became much more positive. One principal who had sat in on a number of SLC meetings noted that teachers not only were working but were enjoying what they were doing. "They could see that they could change things," he noted. "This

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<sup>19</sup>While these decisions generated little conflict, on occasion they made for sadness, as when teachers were required to leave classrooms that had been theirs for many years, or for mild disgruntlement, as when teachers had to trade a classroom with good air-conditioning for one where the air-conditioning was ineffectual.



has been a real positive.” A SIF at another school cited additional evidence of good feeling: Some SLCs were meeting before or after regular school hours, with no complaints from the teachers involved.

Reasoning that schools needed to start off the year on an “up” note, IRRE organized a training session for all teachers during the summer of the planning year that was highly interactive and largely focused on team-building exercises for the SLCs. Research observers noted that participants were very engaged and positive about the training and that it left them eager to get to work implementing First Things First.

In part because morale skyrocketed once teachers were actively involved in planning within their small learning communities, IRRE’s timetable for the new Houston schools calls for teachers to be placed in SLCs some two months earlier than was the case during the 2000-2001 planning year.

**Developing the Family Advocacy component.** Under First Things First, staff in the SLCs are responsible for establishing ongoing relationships with students’ parents or guardians, in order better to understand the settings in which their students are growing up and the issues they confront, as well as to enlist parents’ support for the school’s educational objectives.

The Family Advocacy component is a new one for First Things First, and members of the Family and Community Work Group helped design what it would look like in their schools. Work group members typically began their task by exploring, through group discussion, the obstacles to good relationships with parents and the ways these relationships might be improved. They then developed plans that specified the role and responsibilities of the family advocate as well as designating who the family advocates would be. In most schools, all faculty members were called on to serve in this role.<sup>20</sup>

IRRE organized training workshops on the Family Advocacy component, the last of these occurring toward the end of the planning year or shortly after the implementation year began. Family and Community Work Group members co-presented with other trainers at these workshops. In Houston, city and local school district officials (including representatives from the Mayor’s Anti-Gang Task Force and from the Mayor’s Anti-Drug Enforcement Program as well as the West District’s Family Specialist) also attended this training as representatives of the larger referral system in that city to which the family advocates can turn; in Riverview Gardens, the school district’s three school psychologists were present.

**Setting up individual students’ schedules.** IRRE provided group training and/or site-specific consultation on developing students’ class schedules to the individuals charged with

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<sup>20</sup>IRRE recommended that all administrators as well as faculty members serve as family advocates.

scheduling at each site. Against IRRE's recommendation, however, at the majority of sites, these individuals did not start to set up the schedules until the summer preceding implementation — sometimes not until a matter of days before the school year began.

## Initiating Instructional Changes

Of the seven critical features of First Things First, three features — those relating to “high, clear, and fair academic standards,” “enriched and diverse opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized,” and “equipping, empowering, and expecting staff to improve instruction” — deal with what happens in the classroom. Skilled teaching is important in any event, but the fact that First Things First also calls for extended instructional periods makes it even more critical. As one SIF noted: “You have to be a master teacher to teach on a block. You can't get in there and wing it every day.”

IRRE staff did not originally plan to offer instructional improvement training during the planning year, but, as the year progressed, they increasingly came to believe that this would be an important complement to other activities. Unlike some comprehensive school reform initiatives, First Things First does not at this point include specific high-quality curricula.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, under First Things First, the SLC rather than the academic department becomes the structure with which teachers are principally affiliated. Consequently, the instructional improvement efforts that IRRE offered to sites — unlike the professional development components of some other school reform initiatives — dealt with pedagogical topics that cut across various disciplines, rather than focusing on how to teach particular subject content.

The activities were in large measure directed toward members of the Teaching and Learning Work Groups at the schools. Unlike members of some of the other work groups, these work group members did not have decision-making responsibilities. Rather, it was envisioned that, as the first faculty members to experience the instructional improvement activities associated with the intervention, they would then share what they had learned with other members of the SLCs to which they were assigned. There is little evidence that this learning transfer occurred with any intensity or consistency during the planning year, and, for this reason, IRRE will retarget its instructional improvement efforts to all staff when First Things First moves to additional schools.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>IRRE is in the process of developing an on-line resource of high-quality, standards-based curriculum and assessment materials to which teachers at all schools participating in First Things First will have access.

<sup>22</sup>At one school, members of the Teaching and Learning Work Group scheduled a faculty meeting to present the instructional strategies they had learned to the other teachers. The presentation was canceled, however, in part because the school was behind schedule in implementing other aspects of the initiative. (continued)

The planning-year efforts themselves were of two kinds. First, members of the Teaching and Learning Work Groups were expected to engage in an extended dialogue about teaching and learning. The springboard for their discussion was an IRRE paper describing the initiative's philosophy of instruction.<sup>23</sup> The paper sets forth a number of precepts about what constitutes good teaching and about the kind of classroom climate that teachers should strive to create.

Second, IRRE contracted with consultants who had expertise in the use of specific instructional techniques. These consultants delivered training to select groups of staff members at all sites. The reception accorded to the trainers illustrates some of the tensions involved in delivering effective instructional improvement activities.

Between January and May 2001, the consultants, who had led similar efforts in the Kansas City, Kansas, schools, conducted a series of workshops for members of the Teaching and Learning Work Groups on the use of two related instructional strategies: the "read-aloud" and the "think-aloud."<sup>24</sup> The workshops revealed a tension between IRRE's and the consultants' views of instructional improvement and the kinds of professional development activities to which teachers were accustomed. The developers believed that while, over time, teachers should gain exposure to a variety of effective teaching techniques, they should — through practice, discussion, and reflection — master one technique before moving on to the next. Thus, all three planned workshops in the series centered on the two strategies, and the consultants asked teachers to practice read-alouds and think-alouds in their classrooms and, at some sites, to keep logs of their experiences. Many teachers, on the other hand, were used to professional development activities that touched on many different methods. There was widespread grumbling that the consultants were belaboring a point that they had already grasped (although some of their logs and classroom observations indicated otherwise) or that they were already familiar with these techniques. Other teachers (math teachers, especially) complained that they could not see how the techniques were relevant to their own disciplines.<sup>25</sup> In general, the training proved disappointing to trainers and trainees alike.

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In addition, questions were raised about whether members of the Teaching and Learning Work Group were sufficiently experienced with the strategies to teach them to others.

<sup>23</sup>Institute for Research and Reform in Education, 2000.

<sup>24</sup>In a read-aloud, the teacher models fluent reading of fiction or nonfiction passages as a way of engaging students with text, exposing students to the rhythms of the English language, and demonstrating enjoyment or learning from the act of reading. In a think-aloud, the teacher models the process of gathering meaning from text — for example, determining the main idea and the author's purpose, using prior knowledge to create new knowledge, and recognizing that reading creates new questions for the reader to answer.

<sup>25</sup>At one school, math teachers began to see the value of read-alouds when the SIF modeled the technique in a math class.

One district's point person offered still another explanation for teachers' dissatisfaction with the professional development activities: the discomfort they experienced in writing down how students had re-

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In the future, IRRE will take a different approach to instructional improvement activities. During the planning year at the new Houston schools, all faculty members will be involved in discussions of what constitutes effective teaching and learning. Instructional improvement at the sites now implementing the program will also engage all faculty members and will center on the use of cooperative learning techniques to enhance student engagement in the learning process.

## **Initiating Governance and Accountability Changes**

**Planning for budgeting at the SLC level.** Flexible allocation of resources at the level of the school and of the SLC constitutes one of the intervention's seven critical features. As initially planned by IRRE, a primary responsibility of Finance Work Group members was to coordinate budgetary requests from the different SLCs at their schools.

At all sites, Finance Work Group members met with district personnel who were concerned with financing, and with their principals, to understand the budgeting process. At many sites, the work group's role essentially ended here, with members being in a position to bring what they had learned back to their SLCs. At one middle school, in contrast, the Finance Work Group investigated the cost implications of various staffing decisions and of desired improvements to the physical plant, developed a budget for the school, drew up a list of recommended purchases for each SLC (for example, a computer, a printer, a copier), discussed ideas for fundraising and for securing other material resources (for example, by asking businesses to donate computers), and submitted a grant proposal to a state agency.

**Developing targets for improved student performance.** IRRE required all schools to develop five-year targets for increased achievement in reading and math and for improved student attendance. It also provided technical assistance to the principals and SIFs in developing a plan to reach these targets.

## **Enlisting the Support of the District**

From the outset, IRRE recognized that support from the central office was essential to the initiative's success both in the short and in the long term. IRRE drew up and shared with sites a lengthy list of ways that districts could support implementation of the critical features.

Interviews with superintendents, point persons, and others suggest that during the planning year, districts gave strong support to First Things First. At this early stage, however, few

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sponded when they used a read-aloud and in sharing the information with their colleagues. Keeping such a log, the district superintendent added, introduced a degree of accountability that teachers had not previously experienced.

district personnel who were interviewed seemed to believe that, aside from ceding more responsibility for budgeting to the faculty, First Things First would entail major changes either in district policies or central-office practices.<sup>26</sup> And in none of the four districts did district personnel tell interviewers that planning-year activities had been especially costly or burdensome. The support they did provide was essentially of four types.

First, districts made planning for First Things First the centerpiece of their staff development activities. Thus, full days normally given over to other kinds of professional development training were focused on First Things First, and, at several sites, work group sessions took place during early-release or after-school time that would otherwise have been used for different purposes.

Second, the districts provided financial and staff resources to aid the new intervention. Some of the costs were fairly substantial, such as funding the SIFs' positions and other personnel costs (for example, paying stakeholders to attend the Summer Experience meetings and footing the cost of substitute teachers while regular teachers attended professional development activities). Other costs were relatively trivial, such as paying for special lunches. The district also identified central-office personnel who had special expertise and made them available for consultation with the participating schools. For example, at all sites, the district's financial officer explained the budgeting process to members of the Finance Work Groups; in one district, too, the family and community coordinator was given time to meet with the school's Family and Community Work Group. Sometimes the assistance was more routine, such as having a member of the central-office staff copy large quantities of materials for meetings. While these activities were not especially time-consuming, they may have helped instill awareness of First Things First among central-office personnel as well as build trust between central-office administrators and the school staffs.

Third, in most sites, the central office was responsible for spreading the word about the initiative throughout the community. (In Houston, the schools themselves largely fulfilled this function.) Lengthy newspaper stories about First Things First in Riverview Gardens and Shaw appeared in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and the *Bolivar Commercial*, respectively. The public relations role was especially important for the Greenville superintendent, who used speeches at the Rotary Club and other organizations to build support for First Things First, the merger of the two high schools, and public education more generally.

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<sup>26</sup>The Riverview Gardens superintendent cited one notable exception to this generalization: When a principal of a school participating in the demonstration left for another job and his position became vacant, she supported the school faculty's recommendation for a replacement. The faculty had worked hard to come up with a list of qualifications that the new principal should possess, and these included thorough familiarity with and support for First Things First.

Finally, the district provided oversight to, and the superintendent personified support for, the new intervention. Nowhere was the support role more evident than in Greenville, where the superintendent announced at the Roundtable that he himself would teach a couple of high school math classes. On hearing this, the teachers who were assembled in the auditorium broke into resounding applause. Several other central-office staff members in Greenville will follow his example by returning to the classroom part time.

## Chapter 4

# Early Responses to First Things First: Findings from the Staff Survey

### Introduction

This chapter examines the extent to which the planning-year activities described in Chapter 3 served to increase knowledge of First Things First and to create a sense of urgency, possibility, commitment, and readiness among faculty members at the expansion schools. As noted earlier, the theory of change underlying the initiative posits that high levels of agreement on these early outcomes are a precondition of implementing the reform successfully.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter draws primarily on quantitative data from the survey (described in Chapter 1) that was administered to staff and students at the eight expansion schools between late March and mid-April 2001; the quantitative findings are complemented by qualitative data from interviews with administrators and faculty members. The survey was conducted between five and a half and a little more than six months after the Fall Roundtable meeting, depending on the school. At the point when staff completed the survey, teachers at all but one school had been assigned to their small learning community (SLC) but did not yet know where it would be located in their building or which students and courses they would be teaching. Staff responses to the survey need to be assessed in view of this chronology.

Most respondents to the staff survey (86 percent) had responsibilities in the classroom; they included regular teachers, special education teachers, teacher aides, and paraprofessionals. As noted in Chapter 1, the analysis that follows is limited to the staff members who had classroom responsibilities in order to ensure maximum comparability with earlier surveys in Kansas City, Kansas, which also focused on these groups. Other staff members, including administrators and counselors, were omitted from the analysis, unless they reported having teaching responsibilities as well.

After this introduction, the chapter presents the main findings, addressing three questions: How did the expansion schools, individually and collectively, respond on each of the early outcome measures? Were there particular critical features about which staff were more positive than others? And were there some schools where outcomes were more positive than others? Because some of the findings, like those presented in Chapter 2, are sensitive and might

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<sup>1</sup>Unlike other aspects of the theory of change, however, this assumption is not currently grounded in empirical evidence. From a knowledge-building perspective, a major goal of the evaluation is to build an evidentiary base to substantiate or call into question this hypothesis.



affect the attitudes and behavior of staff members at the participating schools if they knew these outcomes, the schools are again labeled A through H; similarly, the data do not include the number of respondents to particular questions, which would serve to identify the individual schools.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter also explores the findings about early outcomes by looking more closely at the characteristics of the staff members, of the school climate, and of the change process that are associated with variation in responses. Because these characteristics are interrelated — they exist in conjunction with one another — the discussion relies principally on the results of a statistical analysis aimed at determining the importance of each factor while holding the other factors constant.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of the difficulties of determining which factors are important in explaining the variation in responses. Also see Appendix A, which presents a correlation matrix of the early outcome variables at the expansion schools, and Appendix B, which compares staff responses at the expansion schools and at the schools in Kansas City, Kansas.

The main findings of the chapter follow:

- The majority of respondents reported having some knowledge of all seven critical features of First Things First (see Chapter 1, Table 1.2), but few said that they knew a lot about the features.
- The vast majority of respondents believed that students in their schools would benefit from all the critical features' being implemented, although only about one-third believed that this would be essential to improving students' achievement.
- The majority of respondents reported that they were somewhat confident that the critical features could be implemented in their schools and that the changes to be made under First Things First would improve student performance.
- Across all schools, almost half the respondents said that they were very committed to First Things First, and most of the rest said that they were somewhat committed to the initiative.

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<sup>2</sup>Site-specific results will be shared with key administrators at the individual schools to guide program implementation efforts.

- At all schools, staff members rated their principal as being much more committed to First Things First than they themselves were.
- At this relatively early stage, few respondents said that they were well prepared to implement all the critical features of the initiative, and a third said that they were not at all prepared to do so.
- The critical feature that staff members reported knowing most about, feeling most positive about, and being best prepared to implement — high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards — was also one that they judged to be already in place in their schools.
- Staff members at some schools responded significantly more positively to First Things First on a variety of early outcome measures than did their counterparts at other schools.
- Staff members' beliefs that their principal was responsive to their viewpoint and concerned for their well-being were significantly and positively related to their answers on all the early outcome measures.
- Consistent with the literature suggesting that more experienced teachers are more resistant to reform, the more experienced teachers at the expansion schools were more skeptical that First Things First would improve students' performance and were less committed to the initiative than their colleagues who were newer to teaching.
- Nonwhite staff members were more confident than white staffers that First Things First could be implemented and would improve student performance.
- Staff members who had had previous experience with school reform efforts and who believed that these efforts had had positive effects tended to be more positively disposed toward First Things First as well; however, having had a prior negative experience with reform was not significantly associated with outcomes.
- Those who believed that staff at their schools (as opposed to the district or school leadership) had played a role in making important decisions about how First Things First would be implemented were more receptive to the initiative than those who did not see staff members as similarly empowered.

## Presenting the Findings

### The Early Outcome Measures: An Overview

**Knowledge of the initiative's critical features.** The theory of change underlying First Things First holds that people must have an understanding of the changes that will be put in place. Because First Things First is so complex — including changes in structure, instruction, and accountability and governance — assuring that school staff members achieve a sufficient understanding of the intervention is a substantial challenge.

Table 4.1 indicates that, when asked how much they knew about all seven of the initiative's critical features, the largest proportion of those surveyed (56 percent) said that they knew "some." Relatively few, however — between 9 percent and 31 percent, depending on the school — said that they knew "a lot." Across all schools, in fact, respondents were more likely to say that they knew "very little" about all the critical features than that they knew "a lot" (28 percent versus 16 percent, respectively). There were, however, marked and statistically significant differences in the extent of knowledge reported by staff members at the different schools.

**Beliefs about the urgency of change.** Studies examining the factors that contribute to successful education reforms suggest that reform occurs when people are convinced, on a variety of levels, that change is necessary. Otherwise, even if they know a good deal about a reform, they will not see any reason to implement it. Commitment to change arises in part from the desire to address a relevant problem that causes dissatisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

Interviews indicate that most stakeholders were well aware of the low performance of students in their schools — particularly as manifested by low test scores — and that most believed that First Things First had been adopted in response. As a Greenville stakeholder said, "Something had to be done to bring the students up." And a Riverview Gardens stakeholder — noting the district's attendance, dropout, and accreditation problems — commented, "They didn't have a choice."<sup>4</sup>

The staff survey does not measure the teachers' beliefs about the urgency of change per se. Rather, it taps their beliefs about the urgency of mounting First Things First by asking respondents to what extent putting the individual and collective critical features in place would make a difference in improving students' performance.

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<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Evans, 1996; Fullan and Stiegelbauer, 1991.

<sup>4</sup>A small number of stakeholders were more cynical, arguing that First Things First was being implemented for "political" reasons, or so that superintendents could garner national attention.

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 4.1**

### School Staff Members' Knowledge of First Things First

Percentage of Staff Members Reporting How Much They Know				
School	About All Critical Features			Total
	A Lot	Some	Very Little	
A	30.8	57.7	11.5	100.0
B	11.5	60.7	27.9	100.0
C	17.5	42.5	40.0	100.0
D	11.5	47.5	41.0	100.0
E	11.5	64.1	24.4	100.0
F	22.6	63.1	14.3	100.0
G	29.2	58.3	12.5	100.0
H	8.8	57.9	33.3	100.0
All schools	15.5	56.3	28.3	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Differences among the schools in the percentage distributions of responses are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

As Table 4.2 indicates, across all schools, 35 percent of respondents said that implementing all the critical features would “be essential” — the response most clearly indicative of a sense of urgency. Although the majority of respondents did not indicate that implementing all the critical features was a pressing need, most respondents believed that doing so would be beneficial to students. Thus, another 49 percent of those surveyed said that putting in place all seven critical features would “help” improve achievement. Only small percentages thought that implementing all the critical features would “not matter much” (10 percent) or would actually “hurt” students’ performance (5 percent). There were statistically significant differences in how staff members at the different schools responded to this question.

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 4.2**

### School Staff Members' Sense of Urgency About First Things First

School	Percentage of Staff Members Reporting How Much Difference Implementing All Critical Features Will Make for Student Performance				Total
	Will Be Essential	Will Help	Will Not Matter Much	Will Hurt	
A	38.5	57.7	0.0	3.9	100.0
B	50.0	41.4	6.9	1.7	100.0
C	41.5	39.0	17.1	2.4	100.0
D	30.5	44.9	17.0	7.6	100.0
E	29.3	53.3	6.7	10.7	100.0
F	37.5	50.0	9.1	3.4	100.0
G	45.8	54.2	0.0	0.0	100.0
H	23.1	61.5	11.5	3.9	100.0
All schools	35.3	49.2	10.4	5.2	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

Differences among schools in the percentage distributions of responses are statistically significant at the .05 level.

**Beliefs about the possibility of change.** Staff members may believe that change is necessary, and they may have sufficient knowledge of the changes proposed. But if they continue to harbor basic doubts that change can be achieved, they may not make the effort needed to put the reform in place.

Table 4. 3 suggests that the majority of survey respondents (57 percent) had what might be characterized as a cautiously optimistic approach to the possibility of change: They reported that they were “somewhat confident” that the initiative’s critical features could be implemented in their schools. At the extremes, 24 percent said that they were “very confident” that this could be achieved, while 19 percent said that they were “not at all confident.”

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 4.3**

### **School Staff Members' Beliefs About the Possibility of Change**

School	Percentage of Staff Members Reporting Their Level of Confidence That the Critical Features Can Be Implemented in Their Schools			Total
	Very Confident	Somewhat Confident	Not at All Confident	
A	46.2	50.0	3.9	100.0
B	26.6	64.1	9.4	100.0
C	22.2	60.0	17.8	100.0
D	22.5	52.7	24.8	100.0
E	29.9	54.6	15.6	100.0
F	21.6	54.6	23.9	100.0
G	20.0	72.0	8.0	100.0
H	9.3	61.1	29.6	100.0
All schools	23.6	57.1	19.3	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

Differences among schools in the percentage distributions of responses are statistically significant at the .01 level.

Teachers were also asked how confident they were that the changes to be made under First Things First would improve the performance of their students, with similar results: 21 percent of the staff members surveyed indicated that they were “very confident” that First Things First would improve students’ performance; 19 percent said that they were “not at all confident”; and the remaining 60 percent fell someplace in between (not shown in tables).<sup>5</sup>

There were statistically significant differences among the schools in the way staff members responded to both these measures.

<sup>5</sup>These responses are somewhat less positive than the responses to the item used to tap the sense of urgency concerning reform, described above. As noted, 35 percent of the respondents believed that implementing the critical features would “be essential” to improving students’ performance. In responding to the “confidence” question, staff members may have been expressing doubts not about First Things First per se but about the prospects of the intervention’s being implemented successfully in their schools.

## **Respondents' Commitment to Change and Their Perceptions of the Commitment of Others**

Commitment to change is a complex concept, and the staff survey sought to measure it in several ways, asking respondents to rate both their own level of commitment and the degree of commitment exhibited by administrators and colleagues. There were statistically significant differences among the schools on all the measures of commitment.

**Respondents' own degree of commitment.** Staff survey respondents' own level of commitment to the intervention was ascertained in two ways, as shown in Table 4.4. The first was simply a direct question: "How committed are you?"<sup>6</sup> Across all schools, 47 percent of the respondents rated themselves as "very committed" to First Things First, and most of the rest said that they were "somewhat committed." Only one in ten reported feeling "not at all committed." There were sizable variations among schools, with between 23 percent and 85 percent of respondents indicating that they were "very committed."

A second question asked staff members how they felt when they considered implementing the initiative's critical features, collectively and individually.<sup>7</sup> Across all schools, the majority of respondents were favorably disposed to implementing all the critical features: 18 percent said that they were "enthusiastic," and another 44 percent reported "positive" feelings. Only a handful said that they were "dismayed," although about one in five respondents reported being "concerned."<sup>8</sup> Fourteen percent said they had no particular feelings one way or the other.

**Respondents' assessments of the commitment of others.** A more accurate picture of attitudes can sometimes be obtained by using a "projective" technique that asks respondents about their peers rather than (or in addition to) themselves. The staff survey asked respondents not only to rate their own feelings about implementing First Things First but also to assess the reactions of other staff members at their schools.

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<sup>6</sup>Respondents answered using a seven-point scale. Responses of 6 and 7 were taken to indicate "very committed"; responses of 3, 4, and 5, to indicate "somewhat committed"; and responses of 1 and 2, to indicate "not at all committed."

<sup>7</sup>The correlation of ratings on these two measures was .56.

<sup>8</sup>It is, of course, possible to feel positive about the intervention but concerned about implementing it successfully. The correlation between respondents' reported level of confidence that the critical features could be implemented in their schools and their level of commitment to First Things First is quite high — .65 — suggesting that those who expressed "concern" were not all that positively disposed toward the intervention.



**Scaling Up First Things First**  
**Table 4.4**  
**School Staff Members' Personal Commitment to First Things First**

School	How Committed They Are to First Things First				Percentage of Staff Members Reporting				
	Very Committed			Total	How They Feel About Implementing All Critical Features				Total
	Committed	Somewhat Committed	Not at All Committed		Enthusiastic	Positive	Nothing in Particular	Concerned	
A	85.2	11.1	3.7	100.0	29.2	45.8	16.7	8.3	100.0
B	68.8	29.7	1.6	100.0	37.0	44.4	9.3	9.3	100.0
C	31.1	51.1	17.8	100.0	19.4	47.2	11.1	19.4	100.0
D	36.9	45.4	17.7	100.0	14.7	36.7	17.4	22.0	100.0
E	47.4	46.1	6.6	100.0	15.1	54.8	11.0	15.1	100.0
F	54.0	35.6	10.3	100.0	17.1	40.9	12.5	26.1	100.0
G	56.0	44.0	0.0	100.0	16.7	45.8	8.3	29.2	100.0
H	22.6	66.0	11.3	100.0	4.0	41.2	17.7	31.4	100.0
All schools	46.9	42.6	10.5	100.0	17.9	43.6	13.5	20.7	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

Differences among schools in the percentage distributions of responses are significant at the .01 level.

The results appear in Table 4.5. Because the questions were worded differently, it is difficult to draw direct comparisons between responses to the various items.<sup>9</sup> For example, while 47 percent of the respondents said that they were “very committed” to First Things First, only 23 percent judged that most of their colleagues would do whatever was necessary to make the program happen. On the other hand, 53 percent deemed most of their colleagues to be positively disposed toward the initiative (that is, said that their colleagues would either “do whatever is necessary” or would “support other staff members’ efforts” to implement all the critical features). At the other end of the spectrum, 18 percent reported that most of their colleagues were actively or passively opposed to the initiative, compared with 10 percent who said that they personally were not at all committed to it.

Staff members’ willingness initially to accept and ultimately to work on behalf of a new initiative is likely to be strengthened if they believe that administrators are fully committed to the initiative as well. Administrators’ commitment helps to signal that the changes being planned will, in fact, come to pass and that staff who are open and receptive to the changes will fare better than those who are not.

Across all schools, 56 percent of the respondents rated the superintendent of schools in their district as “very committed” to implementing First Things First, and another 12 percent rated that individual as “somewhat committed” (not shown in tables). The overall statistics conceal a great deal of variation by school, however, with the proportion of staff members rating their superintendent as “very committed” varying between 37 percent and 93 percent.<sup>10</sup>

Staff members are much more likely to have close contact with the principal of their school than with the superintendent of schools. It is notable that, at all schools, staff rated their principal as more committed to First Things First than they themselves were; sometimes the disparity was considerable. At all but one school, some two-thirds or more of the staff members surveyed reported that their principal was “very committed” to First Things First (not shown in tables).

### **Readiness to Change**

Preparing the schools and their faculties for change was the central objective of the planning year. To measure the extent to which this objective had been achieved by the time the survey took place, a survey question asked respondents how prepared they were to implement

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<sup>9</sup>The correlation between respondents’ ratings of their own commitment and that of their colleagues’ is .47.

<sup>10</sup>The proportion was generally lower in one district where it was widely known that the superintendent was being considered for another position. It was also lower in a district where First Things First is only one of many reform initiatives being undertaken in the local schools.

# Scaling Up First Things First

Table 4.5

## School Staff Members' Assessments of Their Colleagues' Reactions to Implementing First Things First

School	Percentage of Staff Members Reporting That, in Implementing First Things First, Most Staff Members at Their Schools Would					Total
	Do Whatever Necessary to Make It Happen	Support Other Staff Members' Efforts	Not Stand in the Way	Passively Oppose	Actively Oppose	
A	42.3	38.5	19.2	0.0	0.0	100.0
B	34.9	27.0	27.0	7.9	3.2	100.0
C	25.0	17.5	30.0	22.5	5.0	100.0
D	21.3	23.0	35.3	14.8	5.7	100.0
E	16.2	33.8	25.7	17.6	6.8	100.0
F	17.1	39.8	27.3	12.5	3.4	100.0
G	41.7	33.3	16.7	8.3	0.0	100.0
H	14.8	27.8	37.0	18.5	1.9	100.0
All schools	23.2	29.5	29.3	13.9	4.1	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

Differences among schools in the percentage distributions of responses are statistically significant at the .05 level.

all the critical features of the initiative (Table 4.6). At this relatively early stage, across the schools, only 11 percent of those surveyed said that they were “well prepared,” and another 56 percent reported that they were “somewhat prepared.” Fully one-third reported that they were “not at all prepared” to implement all the critical features.<sup>11</sup> Since, in fact, much remained to be done before the buildings were ready to open their doors as schools implementing First Things First, staff members’ perceptions may have been quite realistic in this regard.

Again, there were statistically significant differences among the responses of staff members at the different schools.

### **The Early Outcomes Considered Together**

Notably, responses on the early outcomes questions were fairly highly correlated with each other. Appendix Table A.1 presents the correlation coefficients of each pair of critical outcomes questions. These correlations range in magnitude from .22 to .80, and all are statistically significant. For example, individuals who reported knowing more about the critical features were also more likely to say that they were prepared to implement them ( $r = .66$ ); similarly, those who accorded the intervention a high degree of urgency were also likely to perceive their colleagues as more supportive of First Things First ( $r = .45$ ).

### **Variations in Teachers’ Responses to Specific Critical Features**

Besides asking about the critical features collectively, the survey also asked respondents how much they knew about, how prepared they were to implement, and how they and their colleagues felt about each critical feature, and how essential each feature was for improving student performance. Table 4.7 summarizes the results across schools.

Teachers reported knowing more about some critical features than they did about others. The critical features about which they reported being more knowledgeable were structural and instructional features directly affecting students: multi-year small learning communities

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<sup>11</sup>Feeling ready for change is an ambiguous concept. On the one hand, even if people feel committed to change, they may not feel fully prepared for it to happen. On the other hand, people may report that they are not ready to change when, in fact, they lack an underlying commitment to the change. In this regard, it is interesting to note that the correlation between the measures of readiness and commitment is .37, indicating that those who reported feeling more prepared to implement all the critical features were also somewhat more likely to report feeling generally committed to First Things First.

## Scaling Up First Things First

**Table 4.6**

### School Staff Members' Readiness to Implement First Things First

School	Percentage of Staff Members Reporting How Prepared They Are to Implement All Critical Features			Total
	Well Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Not at All Prepared	
A	23.8	52.4	23.8	100.0
B	11.3	66.0	22.6	100.0
C	12.1	42.4	45.5	100.0
D	13.4	49.1	37.5	100.0
E	10.8	60.8	28.4	100.0
F	6.9	62.1	31.0	100.0
G	17.4	56.5	26.1	100.0
H	1.9	51.9	46.2	100.0
All schools	10.8	55.8	33.4	100.0

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTES: Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating of sums and differences.

Differences among schools in the percentage distributions of responses are statistically significant at the .10 level.

(SLCs), block scheduling, academic and conduct standards, and diverse learning opportunities.<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that teachers reported being more familiar with these student-oriented critical features, since, as noted in Chapter 2 (and as the rightmost column of Table 4.7

<sup>12</sup>For purposes of this analysis, survey respondents were judged to know more about a specific critical feature if the proportion saying that they knew "a lot" about it was at least 10 percentage points higher than the proportion saying that they knew "a lot" about all the critical features, collectively. The same procedure was used to determine which critical features respondents felt were most important, which they felt most positive about, which their colleagues felt most positive about, and which they were most prepared to implement.

# Scaling Up First Things First

Table 4.7

## School Staff Members' Responses to Individual Critical Features of First Things First

Critical Feature	Know a Lot About	Regard as Essential	Feel Positive About	Colleagues Are Supportive	Prepared to Implement	Reported in Place in Majority of Schools
Lowered student-teacher ratios for 10 hours/week in math and literacy			X	X		
Small, continuous learning communities for same students and teachers	X					X
Class periods lasting more than one hour	X				X	
High, fair, clear student conduct standards	X	X	X	X	X	X
High, fair, clear academic standards	X	X	X	X	X	X
Opportunities provided for students to learn, perform, and be recognized	X		X	X	X	
Teachers given more instructional autonomy			X		X	
Staff collectively responsible for students' meeting academic and behavioral standards						
Teams of staff decide how to allocate available resources					X	

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTE: X indicates that the proportion of staff members who reported knowing "a lot" about the feature in question was at least 10 percentage points higher than that who reported knowing "a lot" about all the features collectively.

reminds us), they perceived several of the features (block scheduling and high, fair, and clear standards for academics and conduct) as already existing in a number of their schools.<sup>13</sup>

Teachers clearly believed that some critical features were more critical than others for improving student achievement. Across all schools, about two-thirds reported that high, fair, and clear academic standards were essential in this regard, and a slightly lower percentage rated high, fair, and clear conduct standards as also essential. On the other hand, only about a third rated class periods of more than an hour as essential — perhaps because so many schools already had instituted block scheduling with no noticeable improvement in outcomes. Only a third, too, thought that multi-year SLCs would be essential for higher student performance, although another 48 percent agreed that they would be helpful in meeting this goal.

Teachers reported feeling especially positive or enthusiastic about lower student-adult ratios; high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards; enriched opportunities for students to learn; and greater instructional autonomy for staff.<sup>14</sup> And they tended to rate their colleagues as especially supportive of almost exactly the same critical features that they themselves most favored.

Finally, respondents reported feeling more ready to implement certain critical features — block scheduling; high academic and conduct standards; and increased opportunities for students to learn, perform, and be recognized — than others. Nonetheless, block scheduling was the only critical feature that a bare majority of respondents (52 percent) reported feeling “well prepared” to implement.<sup>15</sup>

Looking across all the outcomes, it is apparent that staff tended to feel most at ease with high, clear, and fair academic and conduct standards: They reported knowing most about, feeling most positive about, and being best prepared to implement these critical features. And it is

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<sup>13</sup>It is of interest that when stakeholders were asked in open-ended research interviews how First Things First would affect what happened in their classrooms, some said that they did not know, while others responded in terms of reduced student-teacher ratios and stronger relationships with students. Few, however, displayed any awareness that the intervention also calls for changed instructional practices (for example, more hands-on learning).

<sup>14</sup>Stakeholder interviews also suggest that teachers reacted especially favorably toward the structural features of First Things First. Asked what was appealing about the initiative, respondents most often mentioned the establishment of SLCs and continuity of care. As one Greenville stakeholder put it, these two features “will do a lot for our kids. It will give the teachers a chance to work closely with them. Kids won’t be able to fall through the cracks any more, once the teachers are able to keep up with them so well.”

<sup>15</sup>It is noteworthy that, in the research interviews, stakeholders by a large margin judged that the structural features of First Things First — developing continuity of care and forming the SLCs — would be the easiest aspects of the intervention to put in place. As to what would be hardest, their responses were more varied: establishing lower student-teacher ratios was the most frequent response, while other areas of anticipated difficulty included roles and responsibilities with which teachers were largely unfamiliar, including the family advocate role and an increased voice in decision-making.



almost certainly not coincidental that they already deemed such standards to be in place in their schools. It is reasonable to speculate that one reason staff members felt so comfortable with these critical features is that they did not see them as requiring a change in the status quo. On the other hand, the accountability and governance changes associated with First Things First — collective responsibility and decision-making authority with respect to resource allocation — were the critical features with which they were least familiar and to which they showed the least allegiance.

### **Variation in the Early Outcomes, by School**

Tables 4.1 through 4.6 have shown that there were statistically significant differences in how staff members at the different schools responded to each of the early outcome measures. In Table 4.8, this information is compiled to examine whether some schools emerged as significantly more positive or more negative in their ratings across a variety of outcome measures.<sup>16</sup> It is apparent that Schools A, B, and G scored consistently higher than the norm on a number of early outcome measures, while School H scored lower than the norm on several of them.

### **Explaining the Findings**

The remainder of this chapter explores a number of factors to see whether or not they are associated with different responses to the early outcomes measures, paying particular attention to the characteristics and attributes that are frequently cited as important in the school reform literature.

Potential explanatory factors exist in combination with one another, and in different combinations in different schools. For instance, a particular school might have a faculty with a high level of experience, a principal who is seen as strongly committed to First Things First, and a relatively low score on the scale measuring the existence of a culture of continuous improvement. An attempt to measure the influence of any single one of these characteristics without controlling for the others would inadvertently measure not just that characteristic but all the others with which it is associated. At times, where a compelling case can be made despite this problem, it will be made — with the caution that these results cannot be as certain.

For the most part, however, the discussion relies on multiple regression analysis, a statistical technique whereby the importance of each factor can be assessed while holding the other

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<sup>16</sup>For this analysis, a school was rated higher than average if its mean rating on the measure was at least 25 percent of a standard deviation higher than the mean rating for all schools; and it was rated lower than average if its mean score was at least .25 standard deviation lower than the mean rating for all schools.

**Scaling Up First Things First**  
**Table 4.8**  
**School-Level Responses on the Early Outcome Measures**

School	Knowledge Know a Lot About	Urgency View as Essential	Possibility		Commitment			Readiness Prepared to Implement
			Confident Can Be Implemented	Confident Will Improve Performance	Are Very Committed to	Feel Favorable Toward	Colleagues Support	
A	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
B		X		X	X	X	X	
C					(--)			
D	(--)				(--)			
E								
F	X							
G	X	X			X		X	
H			(--)	(--)	(--)	(--)		(--)

SOURCE: 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTES: X indicates that the mean response for the school was at least .25 standard deviation higher than the mean response for all schools.  
(--) indicates that the mean response for the school was at least .25 standard deviation lower than the mean response for all schools.

## Scaling Up First Things First

Table 4.9

## Factors Associated with the Early Outcomes

Variable	Knowledge		Urgency		Possibility			Commitment		Readiness	
	Know a Lot About	Know a Lot About	View as Essential	Confident Can Be Implemented	Confident Will Improve Performance	Are Very Committed	Feel Favorable Toward	Colleagues Support	Prepared to Implement		
Gender (being male)	0.125 (0.052) **	-0.101 (0.049) **	n.s.	n.s.	-0.120 (0.053) **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.108 (0.050) **		
Greater length of teaching experience	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-0.088 (0.049) *	n.s.	0.122 (0.052) **	n.s.		
Positive prior experience with school reform	0.094 (0.057) *	n.s.	n.s.	0.131 (0.049) ***	0.089 (0.050) **	0.142 (0.049) ***	0.153 (0.054) ***	n.s.	0.228 (0.055) ***		
Negative prior experience with school reform	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
Ethnicity (being nonwhite)	n.s.	0.088 (0.053) *	n.s.	0.099 (0.049) **	0.107 (0.049) **	n.s.	n.s.	0.122 (0.052) **	n.s.		
More responsiveness to staff on the part of the principal	0.189 (0.066) ***	0.186 (0.062) ***	n.s.	0.312 (0.057) ***	0.250 (0.058) ***	0.266 (0.057) ***	0.225 (0.063) ***	0.187 (0.060) ***	0.137 (0.063) **		
More commitment to First Things First on the part of the principal	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.142 (0.049) ***	0.160 (0.050) ***	0.203 (0.049) ***	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.		
Greater perception of a culture of continuous improvement	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.192 (0.060) ***	n.s.		

(continued)

Table 4.9 (continued)

Variable	Knowledge		Urgency		Possibility		Commitment		Readiness	
	Know a Lot About	Know a Little About	View as Essential	Confident Can Be Implemented	Confident Will Improve Performance	Are Very Committed	Feel Favorable Toward	Colleagues Support	Prepared to Implement	Readiness
Staff perception of more parental involvement	n.s.	n.s.	0.138 (0.057) **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
More staff leadership in First Things First planning	n.s.	n.s.	0.091 (0.050) *	0.151 (0.046) ***	0.167 (0.046) ***	0.116 (0.045) **	0.124 (0.051) **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
School A	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.110 (0.055) **	0.107 (0.055) *	0.120 (0.054) **	n.s.	0.103 (0.058) *	n.s.	n.s.
School B	n.s.	n.s.	0.260 (0.062) ***	0.127 (0.057) **	0.140 (0.058) *	0.219 (0.057) ***	0.186 (0.063) ***	0.22 (0.060) ***	n.s.	n.s.
School C	-0.135 (0.074) *	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	-0.126 (0.072) *	n.s.
School D	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
School F	0.101 (0.058) *	n.s.	0.128 (0.063) **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.100 (0.061) *	n.s.	n.s.
School G	0.125 (0.052) **	n.s.	0.123 (0.055) **	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	0.161 (0.053) ***	n.s.	n.s.
School H	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.083	0.154	0.284	0.241	0.281	0.166	0.203	0.119		

(continued)

Table 4.9 (continued)

SOURCE: MDRC calculations from the 2001 First Things First staff survey.

NOTES: The first number in each cell is the standardized regression coefficient; it represents the amount of change in the dependent variable, expressed in standard deviation units, created by a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable, or, in the case of dummy variables, a change from one status to the status represented by the dummy. Only statistically significant coefficients are shown; "n.s." denotes that the coefficient was not significant.

The number in parentheses is the standard error.

School E was omitted to allow for the creation of dummy variables.

\* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .10 level.

\*\* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .05 level.

\*\*\* = Differences among schools are statistically significant at the .01 level.

factors constant. Included in the regression analysis are personal characteristics, perceived characteristics of the school leadership and climate, and staff members' perceptions of the extent to which they played a lead role in the planning process. Above and beyond these measured characteristics, the effect of being a staff member at a particular school is also examined. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.9. The rows show the independent variables (the variables whose explanatory power is being tested) and the columns show the dependent variables (the early outcomes — knowledge, readiness, and so on), whose determinants the researchers are trying to explain. Although technical language is avoided where possible, the use of some statistical terms is inevitable.

The table shows those regression coefficients for variables that proved to be statistically significant at at least the .10 level; in the interest of simplicity, the regression coefficients for nonsignificant variables are omitted. Both the independent and the dependent variables have been standardized, so that the coefficients represent the difference from the mean score on the dependent variable, measured in standard deviation units, that is created by a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable (or, for dichotomous variables like gender, a change from one status to another). An important benefit of standardizing the coefficients is that because they are all measured in the same unit, their sizes can be compared to determine whether one variable has a larger influence on an outcome than another does.

### **Personal Characteristics**

The ability to explore the role of personal characteristics in shaping outcomes was necessarily limited by the relatively small number of questions about such characteristics contained in the staff survey. (In particular, the survey did not include questions about teachers' credentials — the degrees and certifications they had attained.) That said, the first several variables in the analysis are personal characteristics — gender, length of teaching experience, prior experience with school reform efforts, and ethnicity — that might be associated with different responses to the survey items relating to early outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Additional analyses (not shown) established that whether respondents were middle school or high school teachers was not significantly associated with their responses on the early outcomes questions.

Without controlling for other variables, the analysis also looked in a preliminary way at one additional variable: the respondent's role in the classroom. First Things First may affect teachers of different subjects in different ways. For example, a music teacher in a performing arts SLC might work more closely with the core-subject teachers in that community than in the past, while a foreign language teacher might not have any strong affiliation with an SLC. Similarly, teachers of different subjects may bring prior experiences to the initiative that lead them to be more supportive or less supportive of it. Special education teachers, for instance, might be expected to be more familiar than their counterparts in other areas with some of the instructional practices that First Things First promotes — teaching in multilevel

(continued)

**Gender.** The gender story is ambiguous and cuts in two different directions. Holding other things constant, across all schools, men were more likely than women to assert that they knew more about and were more prepared to implement First Things First. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to view the initiative's critical features as essential to improved student performance.

**Length of teaching experience.** It is especially interesting to examine teachers' experience levels, both because, as noted in Chapter 2, a large proportion of faculty members surveyed were longtime teachers and because the school change literature indicates that more experienced teachers are also more likely to be less welcoming of reform. A number of stakeholders who were interviewed echoed this assertion. The opinions of one are representative:

The younger teachers tend to be more supportive, the veteran ones are set in their ways and cite past experience as to why things won't work. . . . The veterans don't want to change. They say they've been successful, so why take a chance and blow it?

The staff survey responses lend some weight to this point of view. Other things being equal, experienced teachers were more apt to be skeptical that the initiative's critical features would make a difference for student performance, and they were less committed to the initiative than their colleagues who were newer to teaching. Interestingly, more experienced teachers were also more likely to perceive staff members at their schools as supportive of First Things First.

**Prior experience with school reform.** As noted in Chapter 2, the majority of teachers did not have prior experience with school reform efforts; of those who had been exposed to school reform in the past, the majority viewed it in moderately positive terms. It appears that positive prior experience with reform predisposed people to react favorably to First Things First as well; positive prior experience was a statistically significant predictor of most of the early outcomes. A relatively small number of people who had experienced school reform in the past believed that it had accomplished little or had had negative effects; negative prior experience with reform, however, did not prove to be a significant predictor of attitudes toward First Things First, all else held equal.

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classes, for example. For these reasons, people who occupy different roles in the classroom might be expected to respond differently to the reform.

The results of the preliminary analysis, while less definitive than the regression analysis, suggest that this was not the case. Four groups of classroom personnel responded to the staff survey: "regular" classroom teachers, "specialists" (that is, teachers of art, music, physical education, and so on), special education and ESL teachers (grouped together for this analysis), and teacher aides and paraprofessionals. On the whole, staff members in all four groups responded to the early outcome questions similarly. (While it may be that regular teachers of different subjects responded to First Things First in different ways, in the interest of preserving confidentiality, the survey did not ask teachers what subject they taught.)



**Ethnicity.** The analysis indicates that nonwhite respondents (85 percent of whom were black) were more likely than whites to believe that First Things First was important for improving students' performance, to express confidence that the intervention could be implemented, and to believe that their colleagues supported it. Possibly, the message of First Things First — that all students can learn — may have greater resonance for nonwhite staff.<sup>18</sup>

### **Perceived Characteristics of the School and School Climate Associated with Differences in Staff Responses**

This section revisits the scales developed in Chapter 2 that seek to measure constructs associated with school climate that have been cited in the literature as important in the implementation of school reform efforts: the principal's responsiveness to teachers, the presence of a culture of continuous improvement, and staff perceptions of parental involvement.

**Principal's responsiveness.** Here is the biggest story to emerge from this analysis: Other factors being held constant statistically, when staff perceived that their principal cared about them, listened to them, and essentially was "on their side," they were more likely to respond positively to every one of the early outcome variables. All the coefficients were highly statistically significant, and they were also relatively large — in four of the cases, a change of one standard deviation in the independent variable produced a change of .2 standard deviation (or greater) in the dependent variable, holding all other variables constant.

**Principal's perceived commitment to First Things First.** While staff members' assessments of their principal's degree of commitment to First Things First was not as powerful an explanatory variable as their perceptions of the principal's responsiveness to them and their colleagues, it was nonetheless strongly associated with the measures of possibility and personal commitment. That is, all else equal, staff members who saw their principal as more committed to First Things First also reported being more committed themselves. They also expressed greater confidence that First Things First could be implemented and would make a difference.

**Presence of a culture of continuous improvement and staff members' perceptions of parental involvement.** These two variables did not do much to explain the early outcome measures, although it is encouraging that in the two instances where the coefficients were statistically significant, they were in the direction predicted by theory. The findings in no way, however, negate or minimize the importance of these two variables as potential explanatory factors; rather, the two factors may be at play. First, there may not have been a sufficient amount of

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<sup>18</sup>The author thanks Fred Doolittle for this insight. The regression findings are also consistent with the reports of one field researcher, who noted that while white staff members at the schools that the researcher was studying had complained vociferously about First Things First, nonwhite staff members seemed to adopt a roll-up-your-sleeves, "Let's get it done" attitude.

variation on these measures: As a backward glance at the data in Tables 2.6 and 2.7 suggests, these were not schools with a well-developed culture of continuous improvement or where staff members tended to see parents as very involved. Second, although the scales for these measures have high reliabilities, they may not do a very good job of measuring the underlying constructs.

### **Perceived Characteristics of the Planning Year Associated with Differences in Staff Responses**

**Staff leadership of the planning process.** While the staff survey does not contain extensive data on staff perceptions of the planning process, respondents were asked whether district officials, the building leadership, or school staff had taken the lead in three of the initiative's planning activities.<sup>19</sup> On the basis of their answers, it was possible to identify three groups of staff members: those who believed that school staff had not taken the lead on any of the activities (about two-thirds of all respondents across schools), those who saw schools staff as taking the lead in one of the activities (about 10 percent of the total), and those who thought that school staff had taken the lead in at least two of the three activities (the remaining 23 percent).

For purposes of this analysis, whether the survey respondents were correct in their assessments of who controlled decision-making in their schools is not pertinent; it is their perceptions that count. And, as Table 4.9 shows, their perceptions counted a good deal. Holding other factors constant, those who believed that staff had played a greater leadership role gave more positive responses on five of the eight early outcome measures.

It is important to note that the findings cannot be taken as indicative of a cause-and-effect relationship: It may be that people who were more enthusiastic about First Things First were also more likely to discern a greater staff role in decision-making, whether this was the case or not. This caveat notwithstanding, however, the data yield suggestive if not compelling evidence about the value of making staff feel empowered to make important decisions as a way of increasing their receptivity to reform.

### **Adding Schools to the Picture**

Having taken into account the other explanatory factors, knowing the identity of a particular school continues to play some role, but a relatively modest one, in explaining the early outcomes. Staff at School B — and, to a lesser extent, at Schools A, F, and G — responded especially positively to First Things First; staff at School C were associated with unusually low reported knowledge of and readiness to implement the initiative.

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<sup>19</sup>These were (1) deciding on the new school structure, (2) designing strategies for lowering student-adult ratios, and (3) designing strategies for increasing instructional time for literacy and math.

## A Final Point: The Complexity of Determining What Matters

Many things went on in the eight expansion schools, and the statistical analysis captured only some of them. This is clear from the relatively low  $R^2$ s shown at the bottom of Table 4.7. At best, the analysis explained only 28 percent of the variation in responses (this on the outcome measuring staff members' confidence that the initiative's critical features could be implemented in their schools). The analysis did a particularly inadequate job of explaining the variation in staff knowledge of the initiative; the variables entered into the regression accounted for less than 10 percent of this variation.

Moreover, paradoxes abound in the information at hand. For example, as just noted, staff leadership in planning for First Things First was a statistically significant determinant of many of the early outcomes. Yet, at three of the four schools where First Things First was most positively received, the majority of staff members reported that school staff had not taken the lead in *any* of the planning activities. Perhaps at these schools staff did not expect to have a role in planning or did not regard it as especially important that they have such a role. Furthermore, the cardinal finding of the analysis is that perceiving the school principal as being responsive to staff was the single most important predictor of positive responses on virtually every early outcome. Yet, as Tables 2.6 and 2.7 remind us, the principals at Schools B and G — where staff generally welcomed First Things First — rated below average on this measure.

All this points to the difficulty of identifying with statistical precision what makes some schools more open to change than others. This is particularly true when, as is the case here, the number of observations is small (just eight), when there is considerable difference of opinion within a school, when the measures themselves may be imprecise, and when there are many potential factors explaining differences among the schools — some measured, some unmeasured, some identified as much by art as by science. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research techniques will continue to explore this question as the schools move beyond the planning phase to put First Things First in place.

## Chapter 5

# Reflections and Conclusions

First Things First is a whole-school reform, and, as such, it aims to change many different aspects of school functioning. These include how schools are structured, how instruction takes place, how teachers relate with students and students' family members and with one another, how teachers and students are held accountable, and how resources are allocated. Any single one of these changes would be hard to achieve, and First Things First seeks to change all these things in a short time.

The Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) played a crucial role in making change happen. Throughout the planning year of First Things First, IRRE staff and its consultants — as outside change agents — guided, encouraged, and prodded district and school administrators and staff to take the steps needed to transform their schools into more supportive learning environments. The capacity of IRRE, a leanly staffed organization, was stretched considerably during the planning year, and intensive work with the first eight expansion schools was one reason why; other factors were the need to recruit a district site for the Scaling-Up First Things First demonstration (a requirement ultimately met by the inclusion of six additional schools in Houston) and the organization's ongoing provision of technical assistance to the 43 schools in the Kansas City, Kansas, school district now implementing the initiative.

Many administrators expressed appreciation for IRRE's work. As one put it, "IRRE has been very supportive, nurturing when needed, pushing when needed." At the same time, IRRE served as a lightning rod for opposition and anger. Some of this opposition undoubtedly stemmed from resistance to change on the part of staff members whose roles and routines the initiative threatened to disturb. Some of the opposition, too, arose from the way IRRE dealt with the so-called "structural choices." In introducing First Things First to the schools at the Fall Roundtable meetings, IRRE assured school staff members that they would be free to decide whether their small learning communities (SLCs) would be thematic or not and whether students and teachers would remain together for all three years of middle school and all four years of high school or for shorter periods. But IRRE staff had their own strongly held beliefs — based in large part on the Kansas City, Kansas, experience — about what would work best, and they so forcefully presented their recommendations for thematic, three- or four-year-long SLCs that the teachers believed that their "choice" was a foregone conclusion. Discussions of the issues were protracted and often heated, and feelings of disappointment and distrust persisted long after the decisions had been reached.

IRRE is a learning organization: Each year it modifies its strategies and procedures to reflect the lessons of the preceding 12 months, sometimes adopting a firmer stance, sometimes a

more flexible one. The lesson that IRRE learned from the planning year at the first set of scaling-up schools is that it should not give school personnel a choice about matters that IRRE staff have come to see as integral to the intervention's success. This lesson will be put into effect as the six new schools in Houston enter their planning year: Although teachers will have input into the themes of their SLCs, the fundamental questions of whether SLCs will be thematic and what their duration will be are not open for discussion.

One benefit of this approach is that the six new schools in Houston will have more time available for team-building within the SLCs, as well as for activities focused on critical issues of instructional improvement. With regard to the latter, IRRE has made a second important change: In contrast to the planning-year practice at the first eight expansion schools, where only about one-third of the teachers were exposed to training aimed at improving instruction, all teachers at the six new Houston schools will participate in such training.

IRRE maintains that the establishment of SLCs is an essential prerequisite for instructional reform. Administrators do not challenge this view, but some hold that instructional change must be at the forefront of reform efforts; as one district official put it, "If reform related to instruction doesn't take center stage in the initiative, the rest won't mean squat." Officials have especially strong feelings about this because they are under the gun to demonstrate improvement in student scores on the high-stakes tests administered in their states.

A key question is whether the training in instructional improvement that IRRE plans to deliver at the expansion sites will have the desired effects. During the upcoming year, this training will focus on cooperative learning structures that can be applied across subject areas and that are designed to engage students in learning. Early indications are that many teachers will need assistance in figuring out how to use these generic techniques in conjunction with their particular course content, and plans for such coaching are being developed. At the same time, IRRE is developing an on-line library of high-quality learning activities that are linked to state standards in all core subjects. This will combine course content with effective instructional methods; It seems likely, however, that some staff members will need to be prompted or even prodded to make use of this resource.

Given the extent of transformation that First Things First entails, it is encouraging to find that, six months after the intervention had been introduced in their schools, the majority of staff members appeared to be receptive to the initiative. Across all schools, 85 percent of staff members indicated on a survey that their students would benefit from implementation of the initiative; almost half said that they were very committed to First Things First, and most of the rest said that they were somewhat committed to it. These levels of support for the initiative are generally comparable to those reported by teachers in the Kansas City, Kansas, schools at a comparable point during their planning years. Staff members at the expansion schools reported

less knowledge of the initiative's critical features than their Kansas City counterparts, in part because Kansas City had a year of district-level planning before planning began at the schools themselves. Thus, the School Improvement Facilitators (SIFs) who were designated and trained during this period brought considerable knowledge of the initiative to the schools that they were charged with assisting.

It is not surprising to find that teachers with more experience were more skeptical about and less committed to the intervention than their colleagues who were newer to teaching. What is, perhaps, more surprising and disturbing is to find a pattern of racial differences in how staff members responded to First Things First. Earlier in the report, it was hypothesized that white teachers may not have bought into the program's message — that all children can learn — as strongly as their black and Hispanic counterparts. Administrators and technical assistance providers will need to decide whether they want to address this issue directly in their schools and, if so, how. In any event, they will want to keep this finding in mind.

Two other findings are especially noteworthy. First, support for First Things First was much stronger among staff members who felt that their principal was responsive to their needs and concerns. By expressing support and listening, principals may lessen teachers' anxieties about change and thereby help to ensure that needed changes are put in place. This suggests that leadership training for principals could well focus on developing better, more open, more inclusive communications with other members of the school community while ensuring that reform moves forward.

Second, support for First Things First was also stronger among teachers who felt that they could exercise choices in making decisions about the future of their schools. It is important to note that making the nature of the SLCs nonnegotiable, rather than allowing teachers a say in the matter, does not mean that teachers lack choice altogether. Rather, it means that teachers can turn more quickly to other issues where their participation is vital: establishing discipline policies for their SLC, determining how their SLC's theme can be integrated into the content of their particular subjects and into projects that tie together various subjects, and deciding how the SLC's resources (time, personnel, and money) should be allocated.

Finally, this discussion of the predictors of the early outcome measures begs the question of whether these early indicators are themselves predictors of successful implementation. As described in Chapter 1, the theory of change underlying First Things First maintains that high proportions of teachers must hold positive attitudes toward the initiative — they must feel knowledgeable about it, be convinced of its feasibility and its value for students, and feel committed to it — in order for it be put in place effectively in their schools.

The theory also posits that there is a causal order among the early outcomes — for example, that knowledge and sense of urgency precede commitment. Because the measures of



knowledge, urgency, and commitment were all taken simultaneously, it is impossible to assess whether or not the hypothesized ordering of the early outcomes is correct: It may be that people who feel more committed to change will seek out more information about First Things First than those who are not so committed. The correlation between knowledge and commitment, while positive, is not very strong (.26). On the other hand, the correlation between the measure of urgency — the belief that implementing First Things First will improve students' performance — is quite large (.64). Commitment may be less a matter of knowledge than a leap of faith grounded in the conviction that it is important to do something to boost student achievement. For some teachers, their sense of trust in their principal may be what enables them to make that leap.

It may also be the case that the initial commitment of the teaching staff is not the most important element in the effective implementation of an education reform. Other factors may be more critical — in the case of First Things First, for example, the presence of a strong principal and SIF who, working in tandem, are able to inspire, aid, and push teachers to do what needs to be done. It seems likely that when teachers have visible evidence of effective implementation, they will feel more committed to the intervention than previously.

Questions like these can be addressed in subsequent reports, once implementation of First Things First is well under way at the expansion sites. What seems clear at this early point is that administrators and teachers will continue to need ongoing guidance, encouragement, and pressure from IRRE if implementation is to be successful. Site staff members frankly acknowledge this. When one district official was asked what predictions she would make about implementation given the past histories of the participating schools, their current leadership, and the experience of the planning year, she put it this way: "It will depend 50 percent on IRRE holding our hands, and 50 percent on us standing on our own. It's like riding a bike the first time. I know they can't let go yet. I know that for sure."



**Appendix A**  
**Correlation Matrix of Early Outcome Measures  
at the Expansion Schools**

Appendix Table A.1 presents the correlations among teachers' responses to the early outcome variables across all expansion schools. These correlations range in magnitude from .22 to .80. It is notable that the "knowledge" and "readiness to implement" items are correlated relatively weakly with the other measures.

**Appendix Table A.1**  
**Correlation Matrix of Early Outcome Variables at the Expansion Schools**

Variable	Extent of knowledge of all the critical features	Readiness to implement all the critical features	Belief that implementing all the critical features will be important for student performance	Personal feeling about implementing all the critical features	Colleagues' support for implementing all the critical features	Confidence that the critical features can be implemented in respondents' school	Confidence that implementation of the critical features will improve student performance	Personal commitment to First Things First
Extent of knowledge of all the critical features	1.00	0.66 ***	0.25 ***	0.26 ***	0.22 ***	0.33 ***	0.35 ***	0.33 ***
Readiness to implement all the critical features	0.66 ***	1.00	0.25 ***	0.36 ***	0.27 ***	0.39 ***	0.34 ***	0.37 ***
Belief that implementing all the critical features will be important for student performance	0.25 ***	0.25 ***	1.00	0.64 ***	0.45 ***	0.49 ***	0.54 ***	0.54 ***
Personal feeling about implementing all the critical features	0.26 ***	0.36 ***	0.64 ***	1.00	0.48 ***	0.55 ***	0.55 ***	0.56 ***

(continued)

Appendix Table A.1 (continued)

Variable	Extent of knowledge of all the critical features	Readiness to implement all the critical features	Belief that implementing all the critical features will be important for student performance	Personal feeling about implementing all the critical features	Colleagues' support for implementing all the critical features	Confidence that the critical features can be implemented in respondents' school	Confidence that implementation of the critical features will improve student performance	Personal commitment to First Things First
Colleagues' support for implementing all the critical features	0.22 ***	0.27 ***	0.45 ***	0.48 ***	1.00	0.48 ***	0.47 ***	0.47 ***
Confidence that the critical features can be implemented in respondents' school	0.33 ***	0.39 ***	0.49 ***	0.55 ***	0.48 ***	1.00	0.80 ***	0.65 ***
Confidence that implementation of the critical features will improve student performance	0.35 ***	0.34 ***	0.54 ***	0.55 ***	0.47 ***	0.80 ***	1.00	0.69 ***
Personal commitment to First Things First	0.33 ***	0.37 ***	0.54 ***	0.56 ***	0.47 ***	0.65 ***	0.69 ***	1.00

SOURCE: First Things First 2001 staff survey.

NOTE: \*\*\* = The correlation is statistically significant at the .01 level.

**Appendix B**

**Comparison of Staff Responses  
in Expansion Schools and in Kansas City, Kansas**

It is instructive to compare the early outcomes achieved by the scaling-up schools with those registered by the secondary schools in Kansas City, Kansas, at a comparable point in their development — that is, in the spring of the planning year of First Things First. As noted in Chapter 1, the initiative was introduced into the Kansas City school system in three phases. Thus, this appendix compares findings from the 2001 staff survey at the scaling-up schools with results from three surveys of classroom personnel that were administered (1) in April 1998 at Wyandotte High School and its two associated middle schools, which started planning for First Things First in 1997-1998; (2) in April 1999 at Washington High School and its two middle schools, which started planning one year after Wyandotte; and (3) in April 2000 for Harmon and Schlagle High Schools and their four middle schools, which started planning in 1999-2000.

Appendix Table B.1 compares responses among school staff for five of the eight early outcomes discussed in Chapter 4.<sup>1</sup> For four of the five outcome areas (all except knowledge of First Things First), staff members in the scaling-up schools offered responses that were within the same general range as the answers of their counterparts in Kansas City. Thus, between 23 percent and 46 percent of staff in the scaling-up middle schools saw implementing all the initiative's critical features as essential to improving students' performance, as did between 26 percent and 40 percent of the Kansas City middle school teachers (depending on the implementation "cluster" to which they belonged). Similarly, the range of 31 percent to 50 percent of high school teachers at the scaling-up schools who saw the initiative as essential to improved performance is not far from the 19 percent to 44 percent range at the Kansas City high schools. Staff at the scaling-up middle schools expressed less confidence than their counterparts in Kansas City that the critical features could be successfully implemented in their schools and reported feeling less favorable toward the initiative, but the differences were not large.

With respect to the two measures of commitment to First Things First (the respondent's own feelings and his or her ratings of the extent to which colleagues supported the initiative), it appears that staff at the scaling-up high schools were more positive about First Things First than were their counterparts at three of the four Kansas City high schools (all except Schlagle High School, where program developers noted considerable early resistance to the initiative). Nonetheless, staff responses on the two measures of commitment could be described as being "in the same ballpark" at the scaling-up schools and at Kansas City.

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<sup>1</sup>Two additional outcomes were omitted from the analysis because comparable questions were not included on all the Kansas City surveys. One outcome was excluded because, while the same construct — readiness to implement First Things First — was tapped, the specific questions asked on the Kansas City and on the expansion-school surveys were worded so differently that it is not possible to compare the results.

Expansion-school staff, however, were far less likely to say that they knew a lot about First Things First than were staff in the Kansas City schools. While believing that the initiative's critical features will improve student performance, having confidence that the critical features can be implemented, and feeling committed to the initiative may to some degree entail "leaps of faith," being knowledgeable about First Things First may require more extended exposure to the intervention.<sup>2</sup> Jim Connell, who created First Things First, was a frequent and highly visible presence at the Kansas City schools as they planned for the initiative; he visited the scaling-up sites much less often. Furthermore, because the Kansas City district had a full year to plan First Things First — including hiring and training School Improvement Facilitators — the SIFs were in a position to "hit the ground running," bringing considerable familiarity with the initiative to their schools as soon as the planning year began. At the scaling-up schools, in contrast, the SIFs were often only a few steps ahead of the faculty in their understanding of the initiative and what needed to be accomplished. Finally, because schools were phased in over time in Kansas City, schools that began implementation later were in a position to learn about the initiative from schools in the same district that had gotten an earlier start. The scaling-up schools, by comparison, had only the Kansas City experience on which to draw — and that, at a considerable remove. Within their own districts, they had no prototypes from which to glean further information.

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<sup>2</sup>This hypothesis is not fully consistent with the initiative's theory of change, in which knowledge is seen as a necessary precursor to a sense of possibility and commitment.

# Scaling Up First Things First

## Appendix Table B.1

### Kansas City, Kansas, and Expansion-School Staff Members' Responses to Selected Early Outcome Measures

Site	Percentage of Staff Members Giving Indicated Response					
	Knowledge		Urgency		Possibility	
	Understand Very Well/ Know a Lot About <sup>a</sup>		View as Essential	Very Confident Can Be Implemented	Feel Favorable Toward	Commitment Colleagues Support
Wyandotte cluster						
Middle schools	52		31	30	74	73
High schools	62		44	46	91	76
Washington cluster						
Middle schools	44		33	28	67	57
High schools	49		34	27	72	61
Harmon cluster						
Middle schools	62		26	28	63	47
High schools	60		24	25	72	67
Schlagle cluster						
Middle schools	62		40	40	78	72
High schools	42		19	13	56	42
Non-Kansas City, Kansas						
Expansion schools (average)						
Middle schools	13		30	21	60	51
High schools	17		38	25	62	53
Non-Kansas City, Kansas						
Expansion schools (range)						
Middle schools	9-29		23-46	9-30	45-70	43-75
High schools	12-31		31-50	22-46	51-81	43-81

(continued)



## Appendix Table B.1 (continued)

SOURCES: 1998, 1999, and 2000 staff surveys in Kansas City, Kansas.  
2001 staff survey in expansion schools.

NOTE: <sup>a</sup>In Kansas City, the question tapping knowledge was "How well do you feel you understand the initiative?" At the expansion schools, the comparable question was "How much do you know about all the Critical Features of the First Things First Initiative?"

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Note: For works not published by MDRC, the publisher's name is shown in parentheses. With a few exceptions, this list includes reports published by MDRC since 1999. A complete publications list is available from MDRC and on its Web site ([www.mdrc.org](http://www.mdrc.org)), from which copies of MDRC's publications can also be downloaded.

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*Evaluating the Accelerated Schools Approach: A Look at Early Implementation and Impacts on Student Achievement in Eight Elementary Schools.* 2001. Howard Bloom, Sandra Ham, Laura Melton, Julianne O'Brien.

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*Career Academies: Communities of Support for Students and Teachers — Emerging Findings from a 10-Site Evaluation.* 1997. James Kemple.

*Career Academies: Building Career Awareness and Work-Based Learning Activities Through Employer Partnerships.* 1999. James Kemple, Susan Poglinco, Jason Snipes.

*Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Engagement and Performance in High School.* 2000. James Kemple, Jason Snipes.

*Career Academies: Impacts on Students' Initial Transitions to Post-Secondary Education and Employment.* 2001. James Kemple.

### School-to-Work Project

A study of innovative programs that help students make the transition from school to work or careers.

*Home-Grown Lessons: Innovative Programs Linking School and Work* (Jossey-Bass Publishers). 1995. Edward Pauly, Hilary Kopp, Joshua Haimson.

*Home-Grown Progress: The Evolution of Innovative School-to-Work Programs.* 1997. Rachel Pedraza, Edward Pauly, Hilary Kopp.

### Project Transition

A demonstration program that tested a combination of school-based strategies to facilitate students' transition from middle school to high school.

*Project Transition: Testing an Intervention to Help High School Freshmen Succeed.* 1999. Janet Quint, Cynthia Miller, Jennifer Pastor, Rachel Cytron.

### Equity 2000

Equity 2000 is a nationwide initiative sponsored by the College Board to improve low-income students' access to college. The MDRC paper examines the implementation of Equity 2000 in Milwaukee Public Schools.

*Getting to the Right Algebra: The Equity 2000 Initiative in Milwaukee Public Schools.* 1999. Sandra Ham, Erica Walker.

## Education for Adults and Families

### LILAA Initiative

This study of the Literacy in Libraries Across America (LILAA) initiative explores the efforts of five adult literacy programs in public libraries to improve learner persistence.

*So I Made Up My Mind: Introducing a Study of Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs.* 2000. John T. Comings, Sondra Cuban.

*"I Did It for Myself": Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence in Library Literacy Programs.* 2001. John Comings, Sondra Cuban, Johannes Bos, Catherine Taylor.

### **Toyota Families in Schools**

A discussion of the factors that determine whether an impact analysis of a social program is feasible and warranted, using an evaluation of a new family literacy initiative as a case study.

*An Evaluability Assessment of the Toyota Families in Schools Program.* 2001. Janet Quint.

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An exploration of strategies for increasing low-wage workers' access to and completion of community college programs.

*Opening Doors: Expanding Educational Opportunities for Low-Income Workers.* 2001. Susan Golonka, Lisa Matus-Grossman.

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### **Next Generation Project**

A collaboration among researchers at MDRC and several other leading research institutions focused on studying the effects of welfare, antipoverty, and employment policies on children and families.

*How Welfare and Work Policies Affect Children: A Synthesis of Research.* 2001. Pamela Morris, Aletha Huston, Greg Duncan, Danielle Crosby, Johannes Bos.

*How Welfare and Work Policies Affect Employment and Income: A Synthesis of Research.* 2001. Dan Bloom, Charles Michalopoulos.

### **Minnesota Family Investment Program**

An evaluation of Minnesota's pilot welfare reform initiative, which aims to encourage work, alleviate poverty, and reduce welfare dependence.

*Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program. Volume 2: Effects on Children.* 2000. Lisa Gennetian, Cynthia Miller.

*Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: A Summary of the Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program.* 2000. Virginia Knox, Cynthia Miller, Lisa Gennetian.

### **Canada's Self-Sufficiency Project**

A test of the effectiveness of a temporary earnings supplement on the employment and welfare receipt of public assistance recipients.

*The Self-Sufficiency Project at 36 Months: Effects on Children of a Program That Increased Parental Employment and Income* (Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, Ottawa, Canada). 2000. Pamela Morris, Charles Michalopoulos.

### **National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies**

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*Do Mandatory Welfare-to-Work Programs Affect the Well-Being of Children? A Synthesis of Child Research Conducted as Part of the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies* (HHS/ED). 2000. Gayle Hamilton.

## **Teen Parents on Welfare**

*Teenage Parent Programs: A Synthesis of the Long-Term Effects of the New Chance Demonstration, Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program, and the Teenage Parent Demonstration (TPD).* 1998. Robert Granger, Rachel Cytron.

### **Ohio's LEAP Program**

An evaluation of Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program, which uses financial incentives to encourage teenage parents on welfare to stay in or return to school.

*LEAP: Final Report on Ohio's Welfare Initiative to Improve School Attendance Among Teenage Parents.* 1997. Johannes Bos, Veronica Fellerath.

### **New Chance Demonstration**

A test of a comprehensive program of services that seeks to improve the economic status and general well-being of a group of highly disadvantaged young women and their children.

*New Chance: Final Report on a Comprehensive Program for Young Mothers in Poverty and Their Children.* 1997. Janet Quint, Johannes Bos, Denise Polit.

*Parenting Behavior in a Sample of Young Mothers in Poverty: Results of the New Chance Observational Study.* 1998. Martha Zaslow, Carolyn Eldred, editors.

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MDRC's current projects focus on welfare and economic security, education, and employment and community initiatives. Complementing our evaluations of a wide range of welfare reforms are new studies of supports for the working poor and emerging analyses of how programs affect children's development and their families' well-being. In the field of education, we are testing reforms aimed at improving the performance of public schools, especially in urban areas. Finally, our community projects are using innovative approaches to increase employment in low-income neighborhoods.

Our projects are a mix of demonstrations — field tests of promising program models — and evaluations of government and community initiatives, and we employ a wide range of methods to determine a program's effects, including large-scale studies, surveys, case studies, and ethnographies of individuals and families. We share the findings and lessons from our work — including best practices for program operators — with a broad audience within the policy and practitioner community, as well as the general public and the media.

Over the past quarter century, MDRC has worked in almost every state, all of the nation's largest cities, and Canada. We conduct our projects in partnership with state and local governments, the federal government, public school systems, community organizations, and numerous private philanthropies.





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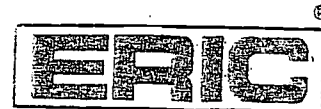
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